

*St. Francis Episcopal Church - The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson
Transfiguration Sunday/Forgiveness Sunday
Text: Luke 9:28-43a*

I didn't do a lot of preaching during this Epiphany season, which began more than five weeks ago when the Magi finally arrived in Bethlehem and I was making my own journey to the Holy Land. So I didn't put in a lot of pulpit time over the past month. But I did do a lot of thinking and praying about these readings from the pews. One of the many reasons I am so very fond of The Episcopal Church is that we follow the rhythm of the liturgical calendar and there is a sense of logic and order to the lectionary for which I'm very grateful. In our tradition, the preacher is not given the responsibility (so often abused in my experience) of deciding which Biblical texts should be read each weekend in Church. The lectionary binds us together, wherever we may be on a given weekend, even if our travels take us halfway around the world to a place like Israel. January is also the month when I send confirmands out with their mentors to visit other local congregations but most of those visits are also to places that use the same lectionary, places where they reflect on these same themes.

So even though I was sitting in the pews at St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem on January 10 and 17, I was hearing the same readings there that you were pondering here, and listening to sermons on the Baptism of Jesus at the Jordan River and then on the miracle of turning water into wine at a wedding reception in Cana of Galilee. Those readings, as well as those we have heard together over the past few weeks (including the gospel reading that Lindsay did such a great job with last weekend) have been focused on the beginnings of Jesus public ministry in and around the Sea of Galilee and themes of healing and calling the disciples, all ways that God is made manifest in the world and in our lives. The hymn, "Songs of Thankfulness and Praise," nicely summarizes the themes of these past five weeks, a season which draws to a close today on the Mount of the Transfiguration. It reflects on the ways that God is made manifest not only in a distant time and place in the life and ministry of Jesus, but here and now, in this time and place.

The reason that we use Eucharistic Prayer C during Epiphany is because it reinforces these same themes about finding God at work in the world, especially where we pray for God to "open our eyes so that we might see [God's] hand at work in the world around us." The theme is not merely that God was once made manifest a long time ago in a distant time and place but that God *is* being made manifest here and now; if only we have eyes to see. One of the main themes of Epiphany is that Jesus is the Light of the world; but a direct corollary to that theme is that you and I are called to walk as children of that Light by letting it shine through our lives. We are called to illuminate the darkness around us so that the world may believe.

All of these themes culminate on the Mount of the Transfiguration. Moses and Elijah represent the two main figures of the Old Testament: the Torah and the Prophets. God seems to speak on mountaintops in the Bible, maybe for the same reason that so many of us feel closer to God when we hike up a mountain and look out over the vista. Whether that vista is a desert in the American southwest or multi-colored maple trees on an October day in New England or vineyards and olive trees somewhere in the hills of Tuscany, it is with good reason that we speak about "mountaintop experiences" as a metaphor for our religious epiphanies. The landscape itself very often helps to "open our eyes so that we might see God's hand at work in the world around us." In such moments we may feel the presence of God more fully and in those same moments may know the experience of being more fully known.

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There is a shadow side here, however; or at least a temptation. We want to savor such moments by trying to hold onto them and even making them normative. They are a gift but the journey of faith is not one long extended mountaintop experience. I think that is primarily what is going on in the disciples' desire to build booths on the Mount of the Transfiguration. It is a normal desire to want to hold on to such mountaintop moments in our lives because they are so precious. But we are called to listen to the Voice of God in this story which makes clear that we are called to listen to, and follow, Jesus, who insists that we are not only mountaintop people, but a people called to follow him the Way of the Cross.

Liturgically then, by remembering the Transfiguration today, we are preparing ourselves to take the next steps in the journey into Lent, which begins this Wednesday. Last month, when I was in Israel, I had a chance to stand on Mt Tabor, which many believe was the mountain in today's gospel that Jesus climbed with Peter and James and John. Our little band of pilgrims celebrated the Eucharist there and yours truly got to be the celebrant. It was an experience I will never forget. As the bread was broken and the wine was shared and it seemed very clear that Christ was in our midst. While I didn't see Moses or Elijah I could better understand that desire to try to hold onto such moments by building some kind of tabernacle. But of course our pilgrimage led us down that mountain and through the Judean desert. Like Peter and James and John we made the hard journey toward Bethphage and Gethsamene and ultimately to Golgatha.

So even if I haven't been in the pulpit much late, that is a summary of where we have been over the past five weeks and where we are going over the course of the next forty days as God's people. But there is one caveat I need to share with all of you. All that I have said to you so far today is shaped by the *Western* Christian liturgical calendar. While there may be differences between Methodists and Lutherans and Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, we all follow this same basic path from Epiphany to the Jordan River and then on to Cana of Galilee and ultimately to the Mt. of the Transfiguration; and from there to Ash Wednesday and ultimately to Easter morning and our songs of alleluia. As the hymn I mentioned earlier puts it, "...from there thou leddest them, steadfast to Jerusalem; cross and Easter day confess, God in man made manifest."

My own experience of the Christian tradition, however, even when it has been quite ecumenical, has still tended to be very western. Being in the Holy Land last month reminded me once again that if one is interested in eastern religious traditions then one need not look only to Buddhism or Hinduism. One of the surprises, if you ever have a chance to travel to the Holy Land, is the ever-present reminder that Christianity is, at its roots, an eastern religion. You feel that and smell it and see it when you walk into a place like the Church of the Nativity or the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It really is true that in Christ there is no east nor west, but you *experience* that in a much deeper way when you worship with the Orthodox, whether Greek or Russian and Ukrainian or Syrian or Armenian. In fact you don't have to go halfway around the world to experience that part of Christ's Body. Worcester has ample opportunities to experience what I'm talking about as one of our confirmands and his mentor recently discovered when they attended an Armenian Orthodox service together. Among other things they came back appreciative of how short our liturgies are!

Alexander Schmemman was the Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary in Crestwood, New York and one of *the* leading liturgical scholars in Orthodox Christianity in the twentieth century. I've been re-reading his book on Orthodox Lenten practices, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha*. The weeks

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immediately preceding Lent are very different than what I have been describing as the journey that has brought us to the Mount of the Transfiguration. The Orthodox focus on five themes before they begin the Lenten journey: Desire for God (the story of Zacchaeus), Humility (the Publican and the Pharisee), Return from Exile (the parable of the Prodigal Son), Last Judgment, and then finally, Forgiveness Sunday.

Lent is not intended as a time to wallow in guilt or shame, but as an invitation to enter more deeply into the mystery of God's abundant love, which then allows us to more fully embrace the Paschal mystery by becoming instruments of God's peace and ambassadors of reconciliation. It is not meant to be a private time, even if confession is personal. *Lent is about being liberated from sin.* The triumph of sin, which we all know too well, is the experience of division, opposition, separation, and hatred. The first chink in the armor of the mighty fortress of sin, however, is forgiveness, for it opens a pathway to unity, solidarity, and love. It is a breakthrough to a new reality, to God's reality. "To forgive," Schmemman writes, "is to reject the hopeless dead-ends of human relations and refer them to Christ."

A friend of mine, a Syrian Orthodox priest in Worcester who was a student of Schmemann's once described to me how this works. The liturgy for this day involves an elaborate dance as each person in worship is able to say to every other person there, "Forgive me, for I have sinned." Now most of you know how hard it can be for us to forgive someone who has hurt us very badly. But at the very least, even when *we* aren't yet able to forgive someone, we can remember that God forgives all who confess their sins and are truly penitent. So the liturgical response to the one who says, "Forgive me for I have sinned" is not "*I* forgive you" because, to be honest, that might not yet be true. Rather, it is this: "God has forgiven you." Even as this dance is unfolding the choir is singing Easter hymns. The theological point, whether one is shaped by eastern or western Christianity is the same: Lent gives us forty days to work on forgiveness and reconciliation. But there is something sensible to me in beginning with the reminder that God gets there before us. When we confess our sins, when we truly repent, the good news of the Christian faith is that God does indeed forgive us. Lent, then, becomes a time for us to try to live more fully into that reality—a journey toward Easter.

There is an atmosphere created in Lent, Schmemman says, a *state of mind* that our worship creates. The spirit of Lent, he says, is meant to help us to experience a "bright sadness" which is the message and the gift of Lent. We are invited to enter this season of "bright sadness" in order to experience that mysterious liberation, a liberation that makes us "light and peaceful" by illuminating an inner beauty that he compares to "an early ray of the sun which, while it is still dark in the valley, begins to lighten up the top of the mountain." Maybe that image gives us our connection between east and west! Maybe that is where the Mount of the Transfiguration converges with Forgiveness Sunday. It gets us to, as Don Henley once put it, to "the heart of the matter, which I think is in fact about forgiveness."

Our normal confession of sin and the absolution pronounced by the priest says the same thing. But I want us to experience that a bit differently today by using the verses and responses found on your scripture insert. *Forgive me, for I am a sinner. God forgives you, be at peace.* My prayer is that this simple prayer may lead us into a Holy Lent and ultimately beyond Lent to the new, liberating life that is ours when once again we sing our alleluias on Easter morning.