

Date: February 18, 2007

SUNDAY: Transfiguration

SERMON: Becoming What We Behold

Text(s): 2 Corinthians 3:1-6, 12-13, 16-18; Luke 9:28-42

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They say that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but at least in the case of this old dog, that's not entirely true. My daughter has been teaching me some new tricks about how you get a 21 month-old very energetic little boy to listen to what you're saying. When our grandson Santi begins to get frustrated and irritated because he can't have something he really wants (like a box of matches or a sharp kitchen knife, for example) and starts to put up a fuss like only a toddler can put up a fuss, she does something I never would have thought of doing when she and her sister were that age.

In the midst of his caterwauling, she lifts him right up close to her face and says, "Look at my eyes. Look at my eyes." And though she may have to repeat it several times before it finally penetrates the noise of his temper tantrum, eventually, he turns his face and begins to look right at her, and then she can say what she has to say calmly and clearly, and he actually listens. The caterwauling gives way to sniffling sobs, and then, in a moment the storm has passed, and he's ready for whatever alternative she's ready to suggest. It's amazing! The key is to get him to look directly at her face despite the fact that he's still howling with frustration, and then, as he looks at her face, he begins to quiet down and actually listen. She's got his full attention, and that's when the situation begins to change.

It's a bit odd, I suppose, that when I began to reflect on these texts that are our readings for this Sunday when we observe the Feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, that bit of toddler training should come to mind, but nevertheless, it did. I've learned that my mind is capable of making all sorts of weird connections. So if you'll hang in there with me for a few moments, we may discover where this is headed.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration, as we have it in the first three gospels in our New Testament is a somewhat bizarre story to begin with, certainly one of the odder stories that we find in the gospels.

The gospel writers did not tell us any of the stories just because they thought they were good stories; they told them for a reason. It's commonly agreed that Mark's gospel was the first of the gospels to be written, with both Matthew and Luke using Mark as their main source. One of the ways we can get at the purposes Matthew and Luke had in writing is by looking at the additions or deletions or changes context they made to a story they got from Mark's gospel. Some of those changes are evident in Luke's version of the Transfiguration story.

For example, Mark places this story immediately after the first of three times in his gospel that Jesus predicts his coming death to his disciples, immediately following their confession of their belief that he is the Messiah. Mark says, "*Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain apart by themselves, and he was transfigured before them.*"

Luke, retains Mark's placement of the story following the first passion prediction, but says that it was eight days later. Seems a small detail, doesn't it. But already by the time of Luke, the early Christians were beginning to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death and what happened afterward by recalling the scriptural stories of creation in Genesis. How many days do the creation stories say that it took God to complete the creation? That's right, six. And the seventh day was the Sabbath, the day of rest and contemplation of the finished work of creation. Mark's six days locates Jesus' death in the unfinished work of creation. But Luke's use of eight days takes it a step beyond. What happens on the eighth day? The beginning of a new creation. The eighth day is the day of resurrection, of re-capitulation, as one of the great early Church Fathers termed it. The eighth day is the day in which the healing and renewing

and restoring of all that is broken and bent and distorted in the creation begins. The eighth day is the day of *shalom*, the divine harmony restored. Many early Christian baptismal fonts were made with eight sides to symbolize the way we enter into that divine work of recreation and restoration.

Neither does Luke use the term “transfigured” as Mark did, but simply says that “*the appearance of Jesus’ face was changed and his clothes became dazzling white.*” In both Mark’s and Luke’s account, Moses and Elijah, representing the “Law and the Prophets,” that is, the scriptures of both Judaism and the earliest Christians, put in an appearance— from the description it sounds almost like a video conference call. But only in Luke’s story, do we hear what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were conferring about. Luke says that they were speaking about Jesus’ departure, literally, his *exodos*, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. It’s an explicit reference to Jesus’ death, but by using the term “exodus” to describe it, Luke has piled an enormous theological meaning onto it. No early Christian and/or Jewish reader could possibly miss his point. By calling to mind the whole Exodus narrative which was so foundational to Israel’s own self-identity, with its themes of deliverance from slavery in Egypt by God’s mighty acts, Luke is saying something very powerful to a community of people who have committed themselves to following this new way— the way of this Jesus whom they confess as Messiah and who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and whom they believe has been raised from the dead.

But we’re not through with Luke’s story-telling artistry yet. The presence of Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets, also is a statement about how Christians were to read their scriptures which they shared with Judaism. It was as Jesus meditated on the Law and the Prophets that the appearance of his face was changed. In that confrontation with the Word of

God, Luke is suggesting, Jesus himself was prepared for his Exodus, the death he would “accomplish” in Jerusalem. This is why, perhaps, Luke also adds something not found in Mark’s story at all, which is that the purpose of the trip up the mountain was for Jesus and his disciples to pray. And it was while they were praying that this rather strange and baffling experience happens. It was through his attentive listening to God in prayer and in prayerful contemplation of the scriptures, that he himself came to understand the fate that was awaiting him in a different way. The death toward which he was moving would not, for him, be a merely senseless or useless death. For him, it would not be the triumph of imperial and brutal Roman power, but rather a mighty act of God that would deliver people from bondage, the same way that God’s mighty acts of power on behalf of Israel in Egypt broke the power of Pharaoh and led the people to freedom. Jesus’ disciples, who gaze on his face, who see the appearance of his face change as he prays and reflects on the scriptures, begin to understand that larger meaning to his death as well. They begin to understand, even if not fully yet, that what to all intents and purposes could be viewed as a senseless tragedy and waste, in fact, by the power of God, heralds the promise of a new creation, the restoration of *shalom* to the world.

Now, I’m going to bring us back to my opening story about toddler training. How does our daughter get our grandson to begin to get through his frustration and see new possibilities other than his thwarted desires? By getting him to look closely and intently at her face and really listening to her words. When he’s looking at her, he hears better. He’s not distracted by everything else around him or by the chaotic feelings inside him. He’s focused on Mommy’s face, and suddenly her voice is the voice he hears, and it frees him to calm down and begin to see that the situation isn’t as desperate as it seemed just a moment ago.

I think that’s what both Luke in the

Transfiguration story and St. Paul in his teaching to the congregation at Corinth in our epistle lesson are getting at. Both of them emphasize that the scriptures are the vehicle for turning our focus, our gaze on God, for getting us to pay attention so that we can hear God's word to us. For Luke, such "conferencing" with the scriptures gives us the ability to discern new meanings in the events of our lives, to discern where God's presence and power are at work in the midst of even the most painful of circumstances.

For Paul, it's the difference between the "letter" and the "spirit." To use the scriptures, as some in the Corinthian community were advocating, in a literal way, had the effect of turning them into "letters of death." Isn't that a great term? Isn't that exactly what too many Christians do with the scriptures—turn them into soul-killing, life-destroying legalistic rules or moral prescriptions? Too often, we allow our own prejudices, our own theological opinions, our own traditions and customs to become a veil over our minds, so that the scriptures end up saying what we want them to say rather than the living Word of God which has the power to recreate the world for us. But as Paul insists, it's the presence of the Holy Spirit, the living spirit of Christ in the community of faith that validates the scriptures and enables them to become a living Word of God to us rather than a "letter of death."

So now, Paul concludes, it's not the letter of the law that has the power to free us and liberate us from bondage and draw us into the new world which we are promised, and which we glimpse by hope in Christ's resurrection. No, it's the Spirit of Christ in the community of believers as together we gather around the scriptures and meditate on them who opens their meaning to us for our own time. And the way we pay attention to the Spirit, is to gaze on the face of Christ. *"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord*

as though reflected in a mirror, are being transfigured into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."

That's the way we learn how to live as people of the resurrection rather than as slaves to the power of death. That's the way we learn to discern where God, the living God of Moses and Elijah and Jesus and Peter and Paul is moving and working. That's the way we prevent the scriptures from becoming a dead letter and allow them to become a vehicle for the living Word. We have to really look at the face of Jesus. We have to really listen to him. We have to pay very close attention to him. We have to be willing to follow him back down the mountain into the valley of the shadow of death and confront the power of the demonic in our world. Only by being together in community, where the Spirit of Christ is present among us, and by paying such close attention to Christ, with unveiled faces, will we be able to experience the freedom that belongs to us as children of God.

That freedom is not a freedom from the cares or sorrows or tragedies of this world; Jesus' disciples had to confront the brokenness and alienation as soon as they came down from their mountaintop prayer meeting and Bible study. Their closeness to Jesus didn't free them from responsibility for confronting the demonic, nor from the necessity of compassion for the suffering around them. It didn't take them into some passionless, calm serenity far removed from the grubbiness and brokenness and the hurting of the world around them. It didn't insulate them in a bubble of "spirituality," which appears to be the quest that many people are on these days. True Christian spirituality is always an engaged spirituality. To be spiritual in the Christian sense is to be involved in compassionate and loving service to others. To be a disciple of Christ means taking on the world's burdens and living redemptively and in hope in the midst of them. The disciples didn't have all their questions or

confusion resolved or find themselves above the possibility of failure by their experience on the Mount of Transfiguration. If anything, they were more mystified than ever. A vision of the glory of God transforms us, but not always in ways we clearly understand.

By really paying attention to Jesus, the disciples saw something that enabled them to begin to live in the reality of the eighth day of creation, a reality they did not fully understand, but which they glimpsed in the face of Jesus. By focusing their attention on Jesus, by beholding him, they discovered that they were becoming like Jesus. And so it will be for us as well. We become what we behold. What we set our gaze on, what we set our hearts on, determines what we become.

All around us, people are desperately searching for something more than just the next new thing. Something more than just paying the rent or getting the kids through college or rooting for the Patriots or Red Sox (well, some people probably are.). What they're looking for is the hope of the eighth day—the hope that life can be transfigured, that the future is worth waiting and working for. And where will they find that hope if not in the faces of those who themselves have been beholding the glory of God in the face of Christ?