

Transfiguration of the Lord (Sunday preceding Lent)

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; Psalm 99; Matthew 17:1-9; II Peter 1:16-21

The Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent is traditionally the Sunday for the celebration of the Transfiguration of the Lord. One of the transfiguration accounts in the Gospels (in this cycle, the account in Matthew) is always considered, together with Epistle and Old Testament lessons that reflect in some way upon such ecstatic experiences. Fortunately, the scriptures for Cycle A not only deal with Jesus' transfiguration, but with Moses' as well, and also with Peter's later reflection upon that event, of which he was an eye-witness!

Exodus 24:12-18 tells the story of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai. Two things happen as a result of that encounter. The external result is that Moses receives the tablets of the Law, as well as important economic, political and spiritual regulations that help order the life of Israel so that it is in its action the holy people of God. The internal result is that Moses is transformed by the experience. The text tells us, "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire, and Moses entered the cloud and went up the mountain" (24:16-18). The result was that Moses was transformed by the experience. Although this text does not tell us so, the latter portion of Exodus tells us, "Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (34:29).

This event is so transformational both to Moses personally and to Israel as a people that it is important to put it in its context, which is a most auspicious context. Moses being in the presence of God and God's giving the two tablets occurs within the larger context of the ratification of the covenant made between God and Israel (24:1-11). It begins with Moses coming down from Mount Sinai and rehearsing the agreements of the covenant with the people (24:1-4), sealing the covenant with the blood of a sacrifice (vss. 4-8), and then returning up the mountain with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the 70 elders, who were the heads of the 12 tribes and key families of Israel (vs. 9).

In this second trip up the mountain, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the 70 elders stand in the presence of God (vss. 10-11). There, the conditions of the covenant are rehearsed (that God would be their God and would favor them; in return, they would keep his Law and submit to his judgments). They then seal this covenant by participating in a covenantal feast together (vs. 11). God grants them a vision of Himself as a seal and proof-positive of God's intentions to sustain such a covenant agreement with Israel (vs. 10). Moses and the elders then return to the plain, and he invests them with the responsibility to provide leadership to the people (vss. 12-14). He then goes back up the mountain with Joshua to reflect on the full covenant and to receive the two tablets (vss. 15-18).

It is particularly noteworthy that, according to this text, Moses sought sufficient time to stay in the presence of God and to receive the Godly instructions that would order the life of Israel (the two tablets and all that lay behind them), sought both to share power with Aaron and others and intended to enable them to assume responsibility for Israel. In his instructions to them, Moses says to the elders after their feast together, "Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute

may go to them” (vs. 14). Thus, Moses had unwittingly set up the conditions that would result in the golden calf incident.

It is in the Old Testament lesson for today that Moses receives the two tablets. When we think of the two tablets, we think of them containing simply the Ten Commandments. What this passage indicates, however, is that what Moses received was far greater than that. It is the full covenant agreement (Exodus 21-23) that includes legislation regulating slavery (21:1-11), stipulations regarding punishment for violence (21:12-27), regulations on property (21:28-36), laws of restitution (22:1-15), social and religious laws (22:16-31), justice for all (23:1-9), sabbatical year regulations (23:10-13), and the three annual festivals of Israel which redistributed wealth (23:14-19). Further, it includes instructions regarding Israel’s worship and the tabernacle (25:1-31:11) and Sabbath law (31:12-17).

The heart of this story, however (particularly in the light of its selection for use on the Festival of the Transfiguration of the Lord), is that this event was a profoundly transformative event for Moses himself. It is an event that certainly transforms Israel, for it makes clear how Israel is to be faithful to the God with whom they covenant – faithfulness being understood as acting justly, equitably sharing wealth, eliminating poverty, and fostering dynamic relationship with God. But it is also transformative for Moses, as he is received into “the glory of the Lord” (vs. 17), manifested by his shining face.

The story is intentionally constructed to be in parallel with the creation story of Gen. 1. As God brought light upon the earth, and with that light, life, so God brings light upon an unwitting Moses so that his face shines with the holiness of God. As God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh, so a cloud covers the mountain for six days before Moses is summoned into the cloud on the seventh day for his “re-creation”. As God made his first covenant with Adam and Eve and thus created people, so God now covenants with Israel through Moses to become God’s new creation – the people of God, the holy people, a kingdom of priests (19:1-6). This is the power of this Old Testament transfiguration story as it foreshadows the greater transfiguration that is to come.

Psalm 2 is a royal psalm, probably used in the coronation of a new king of Israel. It stresses the role of the king as God’s agent upon the earth. The psalm divides into three parts. Verses 1-3 deals with the rebellion of local kings at the selection of this new Israelite king. Verses 4-9 presents God’s reaction to their rebellion and the reaction of the new king, as well, to this immediate challenge of his royal authority. Finally, verses 10-12 resolve the dilemma, with punishment awaiting the rebellious and reward awaiting the obedient.

The first part deals with the rebellion of the local pagan kings (verses 1-3). Recognizing that the installation of a new king is a moment of vulnerability for a kingdom, the local kings (kings of pagan cities and small territories under the hegemony of Israel) who are normally subservient to Israel talk together of seizing the moment and rebelling. This was not unusual; it was a normal action in the Near East for local kings to rebel and seek to escape domination at that time when an overlord died and his successor had just been appointed. “The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and his anointed saying, ‘Let us

burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us” (vs. 2). Thus, these minor kings plan rebellion against both God and the new king.

An interesting note in this psalm is that the king-apparent is referred to as “God’s anointed” (vs. 2). The Hebrew word used here is *mashiach*, or in English, “messiah”! Of course, the word “anointed” refers to the oil poured upon the king-apparent by the high priest at the king’s coronation (cf. I Sam. 16:12-13). But it is intriguing to note how that, by the time of the writing of this psalm, the title of “messiah” is already being used of the king, and would later escalate to that of God’s ultimate choice for leadership of Israel.

The king is also referred to as “God’s son” (2:7), the one with direct kinship to God – but by adoption, not by inheritance. That is seen in verse 7 by stating “today I have begotten you” – the “today” being coronation day. That is, the king is not born as God’s son; rather, he is adopted by God on his coronation day. This stands in distinction to the mythology of other Near-Eastern kings (e.g., the pharaoh of Egypt; the kings of Babylonia and Assyria) who saw their kings as being born as the sons of their nation’s god. The point of the Israelite messiah-king being called God’s son (by adoption) is to stress that the royal authority of the king is not made so by the power of Israel’s army or the wealth of that kingdom, but is a divine gift given to both the king and the nation by God.

It is in the light that the new king is both “messiah” and the “son of God” that the response of the sub-rulers of Israel and the nations around Israel to rebel against that king is particularly ludicrous. And that is exactly the way God reacts to their mutiny.

“He who sits in the heavens laughs! The Lord has them in derision! Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, ‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill’” (vss. 4-6).

The second part deals with both God’s and the king’s reactions to this challenge to the king’s authority (verses 4-9). And the reaction of God is to laugh at the foolishness of these minor kings. Who do they think they are? “The Lord has them in derision!”

God is not intimidated by such brash talk, for he has set his chosen king upon the throne in Jerusalem. That king “shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (vs. 9) if these rebels do not think better of their threatened insurrection. And why? God promises Israel’s king, “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession” (vs. 8). So how will rebellious nations stand over against that action by God? Thus, the psalmist moves to the third part of this psalm.

The third part resolves the dilemma (vss. 10-12). “Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet. Or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Happy are all who take refuge in him” (vss. 10-12).

Don’t be so foolish as to rebel against God! As the old African-American expression states it, “Your arms are too short to box with God!” It will be a very unequal struggle. Instead, find true

joy and contentment, justice and righteousness as a nation, a people, and as a leader, by centering your life upon God and the service of God, by doing justice, and by equitably distributing your wealth so that all are equally advantaged in your kingdom. And if you do so, you will discover that “happy are all who take refuge in Yahweh”!

Psalm 99 begins, “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble. He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!”

Once again, justice, being in a right relationship with God and people, and the holiness of God are all integrated. The praise, worship and enjoyment of God is directly related to our acting justly, equitably sharing wealth and being in a right relationship with people. How the Church can ignore the justice dimension in what is clearly meant as a trilogy throughout scripture is hard to understand. But there is none so blind as those who will not see!

The poem, having laid out the trilogy of a right relationship with God and one another, acting justly toward all and respecting the holiness of God now moves from a concept to the actions of specific people. “Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the Lord, and he answered them. He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them” (vss. 6-7). The Psalmist now returns to the specific incidents: God’s meeting with Israel on Mount Sinai and giving them his Law, and their ignoring of that Law through their love of debauchery and greed. Therefore, the problem with the ignoring of the justice and right relationship sides of God’s call to humanity is not peculiar to the church. It was the frequent temptation and sometimes the outright actions of Israel!

What, then, was God to do in the face of such rebellion? “O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Extol the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy” (vss. 8-9). God loves and God forgives. But God holds people accountable for their actions against each other and against God, as well. Thus, sin cannot be overlooked, but retribution must occur. And why? “Because the Lord our God is holy!”

Matthew 17:1-9 is Matthew’s telling of the story of Jesus’ transfiguration (cf. Mark 9:2-9; Luke 9:28-36). It is notable that there are some common themes in Matthew’s account of the transfiguration and the account of Moses’ standing in God’s presence. Both are on a mountain. The period of time in both cases is six days. A select group is chosen to witness or be present to God’s encounter with Moses or Jesus. Both have a face that shines in the presence of God, both are surrounded by a bright cloud, God speaks from the cloud in both stories, and those observing are in fear (Exod. 24, 34).

Further, Moses and Elijah are reported to be with Jesus, “talking with him” (vs. 3). Moses, of course, represents the Law and Elijah the prophetic tradition – both, together, summarize the Old Testament covenant. And now Jesus offers a new covenant and God’s new salvific work in and to the world.

This account in Matthew of Jesus’ transfiguration also contains another parallel with the words that God speaks to Jesus. In fact, the only time God literally speaks in the Gospel of Matthew is in the account of Jesus’ baptism and in the account of Jesus’ transfiguration. And most intriguingly, the words God speaks are identical, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased” (3:17; 17:5). However, in the transfiguration story, Matthew has God add the command, “Listen to him”. It is clear that what Matthew wants to do in both of these stories is to make crystal clear that it is God – and not Israel’s religious, political or economic leaders – who identify Jesus as “my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased”.

All three clauses are important. The Gospel of Matthew proclaims Jesus primarily as the Messiah, the chosen Davidic heir who liberates Israel from what oppresses it. But in both of these “God-talk” incidents, Jesus is identified as more than the Messiah; he is identified as God’s Son, “the Beloved”, and that God is well-pleased with that unique incarnation of God’s self – his “Son”! The command that follows, therefore, is inevitable: “Listen to him”. Take him with utmost seriousness. For it will be this One who will lead you, the nation and all humanity to the acting out of God’s intentions for humanity – the building of the shalom community.

Dale Bruner, in his magisterial commentary on Matthew, *The Christbook* (Volume 1) and *The Churchbook* (Vol. 2 of Matthew), suggests that what this chapter is all about is power -- a display of the power that is the strength and motivating force of the church. He notes, “In the seventeenth chapter we have three major stories: the Transfiguration, the conversation about Elijah, and the healing of the disciples’ inability. The first story takes place on top of a mountain, the second on the way down the mountain, and the third at the foot of the mountain. On the mountaintop we learn who has supreme power in the church; on the walk down we learn that suffering is the form this power takes; and at the foot of the mountain we learn how disciples put Jesus’ power to work in the world. The whole chapter, then, is about power in the church: where it is lodged, its form, and its use” (*The Churchbook*, p. 164).

The story of the Transfiguration is a lesson on power, perhaps *the* lesson on power. It deals with power in two ways. First, it deals with the nature of power. And second, it deals in whom power ultimately resides.

First, the story of the Transfiguration deals with the nature of power. That nature is manifested as much in the continuation of the story as Jesus walks down the mountainside, reflecting with his disciples on what they had just witnessed as it did with Jesus on the mountain transfigured before Moses and Elijah. In that reflection, Jesus says to Peter, James and John, “The Son of Man is about to suffer at their (that is, the establishment’s) hands” (vs. 12). That is, true Godly power is not the power of domination, but the power of servanthood, the power of suffering, the power of commitment to others. It is the power that is not afraid to suffer at the hands of the political, economic or religious powers, but in that suffering, can transform the world.

The authentic nature of power is magnificently articulated by Jesus in a comparable passage to 17:12, when Matthew tells of Jesus' reflection about power with his disciples in Matthew 20:25-28. There, Jesus states that "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over the people, and their great ones are tyrants over them" (20:25). He goes on to instruct his disciples, "It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (20:26-28).

In this profound statement by Jesus, he is stating that the image of a servant captures the essence of true power. Both Roman governor and Jewish rebel, both Jewish priest and Jewish peasant understand power essentially as being that of domination, of power *over* another, of power *pressed down* upon another. But what Jesus is suggesting is that Godly power, transfiguration power is something profoundly different.

Authentic power, Jesus is teaching in both this statement and in our Gospel lesson for today is "servant power". The "one who gives his life as a ransom for many" (20:28), the one who "is about to suffer at (the establishment's) hands" (17:12) captures the essence of true power.

In other words, what Jesus is teaching his disciples in this passage is the power of relationships. For if God is about anything, he is about relationships. Even the words used for God are relational in nature – Father, Son, Spirit – and God's work in and through us are described in relational terms – loving kindness, *agape* love, *phileo* (brotherly) love, grace, truthfulness, covenant. Evil, on the other hand, is described unilaterally – whether it is the evil of people, society, the demonic or the Evil One. The work of Satan is seen as a work of domination, of power over people and nations, with evil as its primary intent.

But both God and Jesus use power relationally. Rather than "power over", Jesus' kind of relational power is "power with", shared power, mutual power, reciprocal power. It is not the power of weakness, of acquiescence, of apathy. It is direct, specific, realistic, flexible, accountable and negotiable. But it is a power that is built upon the relationships one has carefully built with others that seeks the good of the other as well as one's self. Therefore, by definition, it is a power that seeks "not to be served but to serve", even if that means "suffering at (the establishment's) hands", even if it means giving one's life as "a ransom for many". This is the radical power demonstrated in the events of the Transfiguration, as Jesus is praised by God on top of the mountain, instructs frightened disciples on the way down the mountain, and heals a boy with a demon at the foot of that mountain!

Second, the story of the Transfiguration deals in who power ultimately resides. It does not reside with "Moses", nor does it reside with "Elijah". "Moses", of course, refers not only to the man himself but with what that man represented – the Law of Israel that was designed to bring God's order to them. Likewise, "Elijah" refers not only to the man himself but to Israel's prophetic tradition whom this one – the greatest of the prophets – represents. Moses and Elijah are present, not to receive recognition from God but to encourage Jesus, to reflect with him, to stand with him. But it is not they whom God commends. Rather it is Jesus! "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him". Listen to *him* – not to Moses, not to Elijah, but listen to, obey and follow Jesus. So in whom does God's power reside? It resides, in the final

analysis, not with the Law nor with ecstatic religious experience, but with Jesus. Follow him! The text is all about power!

II Peter 1:16-21. Although the Second Epistle of Peter was almost certainly not written by Peter, what is preserved here is most likely Peter's account of the Transfiguration. What we are reading is Peter's recollection of that pivotal event, as he related it to the eventual author of II Peter.

The passage divides into two commentaries. The first is Peter's description of what actually happened upon that mountain. "For we did not follow devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (1:16-18). Thus, Peter's retelling of the story is almost exactly as Matthew described it in his Gospel.

The second commentary elaborates Peter's opening words of his story ("For we did not follow devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses"). Seeking to validate his right to proclaim Christ and not to be dismissed as an irrelevant old man, dreaming dreams, Peter states, "So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (vss. 19-21).

Peter wishes to assert his apostolic authority over against church dissidents whose teachings would undermine belief in the return of Jesus Christ. By reminding them of his eyewitness presence at the transfiguration at which Moses (dead 1200 years) and Elijah (dead 800 years) both appeared and talked with Jesus, and in which God pronounced Jesus as "my Son, my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased", Peter is asserting that Jesus also will someday return as did Moses and Elijah. For they were nothing but obedient servants of God, whereas Jesus is God's own son. Therefore, when Peter proclaims Jesus' future coming, he is not presenting "cleverly devised myths" but God's "power" and intent.

This, in turn, leads Peter to reflect on how prophecy is considered by the church. The words a prophet speaks from God are not open to individual interpretation (which is what these dissidents are doing). Rather, interpretation of scripture must be a corporate interpretation; those who are "men and women moved by the Holy Spirit" are together reflecting upon and interpreting the prophecy which came from the Holy Spirit. Thus, Spirit speaks to spirit, and the word is consequently rightly interpreted.

As Oecumenius, the sixth century theologian put it, "Peter says that he has not invented stories but merely handed on the teaching of Christ in simple and humble words, as Paul also told the

Corinthians he was doing. This means that the prophets (including Peter) received their prophecies from God and transmitted what God wanted to say, not what they wanted. They were fully aware that the message had been given to them, and they made no attempt to put their own interpretation on it” (*Commentary on 2 Peter*).

In reality, Peter’s entire re-telling of this story concentrates almost entirely upon the theme of power. The terms he uses to refer to Jesus are all “power” words, particularly if you consider that such words were consistently used of the Roman emperor – words like “power”, “majesty”, “received honor and glory from God the Father”, “Majestic Glory”. Further, it uses the Greek “parousia” to describe Jesus’ second coming in glory (3:4, 12; Matt. 24:27; I Thess. 3:13), a word that is used always within the context of the display of power. No wonder the passage then moves into the call to Christians to take with utter seriousness the word of God as it comes to them, and as it is lived out in Jesus himself.

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