

SHINY, HAPPY PEOPLE

Luke 9: 28-43

Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2010

Rev. James Campbell

Ten years ago on Transfiguration Sunday, this congregation marched down Broadway singing “When the Saints Go Marching In”, led by a Dixieland Jazz Band. When they arrived at this building, they were welcomed by the good people of Advent Church. And thus began our life together. Four years ago on Transfiguration Sunday, this congregation voted to call me to be the pastor of this church. Both of these events were outside of the norm. Both of these events were subject to scrutiny and doubt. And both of these events were miracles in their own way.

Now to speak of these kinds of miracles doesn’t really challenge our thinking very much. We sometimes chalk it up to hyperbole. But what about the miracles of the Bible? What to you make of those stories? Do they have any veracity at all? Are they allegories meant to teach us important lessons? Or are they simply the primitive thoughts of ancient, superstitious people who simply didn’t understand the way the world works?

As a child, I was taught that all the Biblical miracles happened just as they are described. And that belief was easy to sustain as a child. But it got harder as I grew up, as I was exposed to science and philosophy and theology. My studies challenged my presuppositions about the Bible's miracles. Over time my ideas morphed and changed and became something completely different. But unlike some folks I knew who took the same journey, I didn't "throw the baby out with the bath water" and simply dismiss these stories. I struggled and continue to struggle with them, but the more I live, the older I get, it seems to me that the main task of a miracle story is to work a miracle in us.

Making that connection is easier to do with some miracle stories than with others. For example, when we speak of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we may not completely understand it, but its message to us is loud and clear. The Resurrection boldly proclaims that God's love is stronger than death; that God refuses to let evil and violence have the final word. Likewise, Jesus feeding the 5000 speaks of God's care for our physical needs. Jesus healing a leper speaks to our own yearning for health and acceptance.

But what about the Transfiguration? What is its point? Does it have the power to work a miracle in us?

This story is told in all three of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The details differ with each of the evangelists, but the main point is the same. And Luke tells his version like this: about a week before the Transfiguration, Jesus had told his disciples that he would suffer and die. No doubt this weighed heavily upon all their minds. And so when Jesus asked Peter, John and James to go away and pray with him, I suspect they welcomed that opportunity with open arms.

Luke says that they went up on a mountain to pray. The Bible never specifies which mountain it was, but scholars believe it was the beautiful, snow-capped Mount Hermon. While Jesus was praying, his face changed and his clothing became dazzling white. Then Moses and Elijah appeared and engaged Jesus in a conversation about his impending earthly departure. Upon seeing such a sight, Peter, always impetuous but with a good heart, exclaimed that they should build some shrines to remember this wondrous event. The icing on the cake was a cloud that descended upon them with a voice that said: "This is my Son, the Chosen; listen to him!"

And then it was all over before they could even begin to comprehend it. How typical of a miracle. They were frightened and confused and Luke writes that *“they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.”*

And that confusion and silence about the Transfiguration persists to this day.

We still don't know what to make of the Transfiguration.

Now there are lots of ways one can look at this story. One of the most common is to emphasize the appearance of Moses and Elijah as representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Their appearance on the mountain with Jesus implied that Jesus was connected to his Jewish faith all those who had come before. This three-way conversation on the mountaintop seemed to confirm that.

Others take that thought a little further and propose that the appearance of Moses and Elijah actually signified their diminishing importance. While in the past God's people were to obey the law and heed the prophets, in the coming of Jesus God's new commandment was simply to *“Listen to him.”* But taken to an extreme, this is a slippery slope. Not only does it diminish the Jewishness of Jesus, but it implies that the Law and the Prophets no longer

have any validity. And this kind of thinking has led to some truly dreadful persecutions of the Jews at the hands of Christians.

Other scholars are quick to point out that this story is not that out of the ordinary for the ancient world. It has many of the same elements as other ancient myths. Mountains and clouds were often seen as a place where the gods dwelled, including the God of Israel. Remember, Moses went up to Sinai's heights to receive the Law. The Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus and later some of the Roman gods were thought to spend time there as well.

And finally, perhaps the most common explanation of this event is to simply say that the Transfiguration was God's way of saying that Jesus was different, special, chosen. Jesus' changed appearance was simply verification that he was the One in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

Transfiguration, then, is about Jesus' divinity.

Now all of those ideas are interesting. And all of them lend some light to this strange happening. But remember my own theory that the miracle stories are supposed to work miracles in us. I doubt that any of these explanations did that.

And so I struggled this week with this story – trying to make a connection with all of our lives. And then, in my studies, I came upon the musings of Episcopal Curate Adam Thomas. And he says something that I had never heard before. Thomas suggests that perhaps this story is not so much about how Jesus looked as he was transfigured as it is about how we all look, as seen through the eyes of God. The Transfiguration shows us God’s point of view. Our Creator looks at us and sees the divine image, luminous with possibility.

Now the truth is that we don’t always feel very luminous. We have stains and dark places and poisonous secrets. Our sins sometimes obscure our beauty. And for this reason alone, we should approach Lent not with fear and dread and dourness, but anticipation.

In the 40 days that will begin this Wednesday, we will slow down and reflect. We will confess and pray. We will, with purpose and deliberation, give ourselves to good works and acts of charity. And each time we engage in any of these things, it’s as if we rub off a little more of the tarnish off our souls. And we begin to look more and more like the people that God already sees. And that is nothing less than a miracle - for lo and behold, we shine!

Thanks be to God. Amen.