

Series: Lessons from the Common Lectionary

Today: Experiencing the Holiness of God

Text: Matthew 17:1-9

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, March 6, 2011 (Transfiguration Sunday)

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Thinking about how we might spend our time if we knew that you only had a few days to live isn't something most of us choose to do. It forces us to confront the reality of our mortality, and usually by the time we consider the question our abilities may well have diminished so that we are no longer able to do the things we might like to do.

Today's scripture is the story about one of the things which Jesus did during the final days of his life. He and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus knew that his time on earth was coming to a close. In Matthew 16 he tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, undergo great suffering, be killed, and on the 3rd day be raised from the dead.

Jesus knew he was going to die, and one of the first things he chose to do was to go to a place where he could experience the presence of God in such a powerful way that he would have the courage and the strength to face the events we know as his Passion not run away.

So Jesus takes three of his disciples (Peter, James, and John) with him and he climbs part way up Mt. Hermon. There he experiences the presence of God in such a powerful way that he leaves that place knowing who he is and what he is to do with the final days of his life.

This morning I would like to hold up that experience for those of us who want to follow Jesus and who want to experience what Jesus experienced. I would suggest to you that the experience of Jesus had three elements to it: Context, Content, and Consequence.

Context

In order for Jesus to do what he needed to do in the final weeks of his life, he was given a context. Our scripture says that he was transfigured; he was changed before the eyes of his disciples. His face shone like the sun; his clothing became dazzling white; and there standing beside him was Moses and Elijah representing the historic roots of his faith: the Law and the Prophets. Jesus had an experience of God's holiness, but it was not separate from what he had learned in the synagogue or in his home. It was in the context of his Jewish faith.

I have been a member of a 12 step support group for over two decades now which makes me an "old man" in that program. Lately I have been privileged to have a number of conversations with young people in that program about their spiritual journey. They are often surprised when they learn I am a Presbyterian minister, and they often say something like, *"I am a very spiritual person, but I am not very religious."* I think I have learned to translate what that means. I think what they are saying is, *"I have an experience of the Holy in my life, but the church really turns me off."*

That makes me sad because I have found meaning and direction in my life through the teachings of Jesus in the context of my commitment to community in the church. I have had other experiences of the Holy in all different kinds of places just like them; transcendent moments when I could not deny that there was a power greater than myself who was sustaining me and the rest of the world. I experience the Holy when I walk on the beach. I experienced the Holy when I watched my wife give birth to our children. I experienced the Holy when I slept at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. On my sabbatical leave several years ago, I experienced the Holy in a 16th century cathedral on the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland when my daughter was in kidney failure and my wife was battling stage 4 breast cancer. It was there I felt the presence of God surrounding me and assuring me that no matter what happened to them, I would not be left without resources.

I value every single one of those experiences and many more, but the experience of the Holy which helps me to organize my life; which gives me a sense of history; which helps me to establish a reason for living and seek a purpose for my life has come through the context of the Christian faith. I have learned about God's creation of the world and God's love for humankind through the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and what the great thinkers of the church throughout the ages have gleaned from those texts. I don't deny for a moment that there are many different ways to experience the power and the presence of God, but what does one do when one cannot summon up one of those transcendent moments and needs to know that they are not alone; that God has not deserted them. The context in which Jesus experienced the holiness of God was rooted and grounded in the scriptures of his faith, the Law and the Prophets. It is a good place for us to begin, as well.

Content

The context of Jesus experience of the God's holiness was surrounded by those in scripture who represented the Law and the Prophets. The content of his experience was a confirmation of who he was.

One of the questions which we used to love to debate in Seminary was this: When Jesus really knew who he was? When did he really know he was the Son of God? Was it at his birth when Shepherds and Wise Men came to pay him homage? Was it when he taught his elders in the Temple when he was just a boy and when questioned by his parents about what he was doing said, "*Did you not know I would be about my Father's business?*" Was it at his baptism when the Holy Spirit came like a dove and pronounced words similar to the ones we hear in this passage: "*This is my Son in whom I am well pleased?*" Or was this the moment, the time when he withdrew from the crowds as he prepared himself to go to Jerusalem where his destiny awaited him, to seek refuge in deep and profound prayer?

Coming to have a sense of our identity as a child of God is the content for anyone who experiences the holiness of God. Knowing that you belong to God and that nothing can separate you

from the love of God is the gift of being in the presence of God. You are a child of God. Nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Father John Powell says that when he was a young priest, he used to argue with parents who came to him saying that they wanted their children to be baptized. *“Why would you want to do that to him/her?”* he would say. *“If I baptize your child, I have given him a new last name. He is no longer John Jacobs, your son. He becomes John Jacob Christian. He bears the last name of our savior: the Christ, the chosen one. And like any last name, he will never live it down. It will be the source of his identity. You may think of yourselves as David and Linda Jacobs, but you are not. You are David and Linda Jacobs Christian. You are claimed by God in the name of Jesus Christ. This is who you are. You may choose to run or you may try to hide your identity, but you can never get away from God. You are a Christian, and that means you belong to God no matter what. There is nothing that will keep God from loving you.”*

It is an awesome experience to discover our identity in love of God. This was the content of the experience that Jesus had.

Consequence

After Jesus receives his identity on Mt. Hermon, he knows he cannot stay there. Peter wants to stay. He wants to build a shelter for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. He wants to capture the moment and be sure that nothing changes, but Jesus, having been assured of his identity knows what is next, and he knows exactly what's at stake. He comforts his disciples and encourages them not to be afraid, but then he warns his disciples not to tell anyone about the experience. His destiny will unfold soon enough without inciting the forces who are plotting against him.

So they leave Mt. Hermon to continue their journey to Jerusalem. We who follow Jesus know how that story will end, but each year we travel the road with him again to be reminded of the depth of

his love for us. We might like to stay on the mountaintop and bask in the glow of the transfiguration, but Jesus knows that once our identity is secure, there is work to be done, and we are the only ones who are able to do the unique work that God wants us to do. God has secured our identity in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have seen his glory. Now we must do what we are called to do.

I am reminded of John of Kronstadt ... was a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox priest at the time when alcohol abuse was rampant. None of the priests ventured out of their churches to help the people. They waited for the people to come to them. John, compelled by love, went out into the streets. People said he would lift the hungover, foul-smelling people from the gutter, cradle them in his arms, and say to them, "This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God." ...

Like John of Kronstadt, we can say to the broken, "Your brokenness does not define you. You are one in whom Christ dwells. You were meant to house the fullness of God."

Conclusion

As we stand on the edge of our Lenten Journey, this is a good place to begin: the table of our Lord. It is here that we gain the context for that journey recorded in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is here that we understand the content of the journey: that the love of God cannot be thwarted by death. And it is here that we begin to sense the consequence of following Jesus; that we must die to ourselves so that we may be used by God to bring hope into this world. Welcome to the table of the Lord.