

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

The Transfiguration of Jesus Christ
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Today we celebrate the Transfiguration or Transformation of Jesus in the presence of Peter, James and John on the mountain. On the mountain top, they witnessed an event so transformative, so moving and so life changing that Peter's only response; just like any one of us, was, Rabbi, it is good we are here; Teacher, it is good that you brought us with you, for the sake of this experience and for our own benefit, let us memorialize this event; permit us to build three dwellings; one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

Divine human encounters usually open our eyes and reveal to us certain attributes of the divine that we had not previously considered or been unaware of. The people of Israel suddenly had to experience the radiance of God emanating from the face of Moses. The man, who once walked around with no veil, now had to wear a veil because of the radiance of the light from his face.

To be honest, there was nothing wrong or new with memorializing a religious experience. Jewish history is replete with patriarchs who did not hesitate to build altars as symbols in recognition of an encounter with the divine. As he flee from his brother Esau, Jacob used a stone as a pillow in the night. As he slept, he had a dream of an ladder stretching from heaven to earth with God standing at the top of the ladder. God promises to give the land to Jacob. He wakes up from his dream, anoints the stone upon which he laid his head and calls the place Bethel-the house of God.

Capturing a religious encounter with material symbols wasn't anything new. What was new this time was that the person with whom they beheld the glory of God, was not to be held bound to the limitations of symbols sitting on top of a mountain. What was new this time was the reality of being witnesses-taking the stories with us because they meant more to those who were not primary witnesses but are waiting at the bottom of the mountain for our stories of salvation.

I love to hear stories of faith. I love to hear stories of divine encounters, and often times those who have had the benefit of these encounters become so overwhelmed by the experience that they are unable come up with the appropriate language to put their encounter into words. Words often fail us, and they fail to help us articulate a reflection of an experience that touches our core and initiate a transformation within us.

Absent of language, the tendency is to create symbols that potentially become ends in themselves and not a means to the end we seek. Symbols are great, and like an icon which point us beyond itself and translates human imagination into boundless work of art. Symbols are only meaningful when they point us to the mystery of God.

That is why I can hear Jesus ask Peter, what is the point of a revelation or a divine encounter if it is memorialized only in symbols? What is the goal of building a booth on the top of a mountain when there are countless people at the bottom of the mountain waiting to share in your experience? What is the purpose in building a booth on this mountain when real transformation await at the bottom of the mountain? Each of us awaits at the bottom of the mountain.

The letter of Peter vouches for the authenticity of the gospel to those at the bottom of the mountain by arguing that neither he nor any of his companions are followers of any deception. For he himself was a witness alongside John and James when Jesus was transfigured. On the same mountain top, they heard the prophetic confirmation of Jesus as God's beloved Son who should be listened to by those at the bottom of the mountain. As witnesses of that event, the task was not to proclaim ourselves for that would mean building symbols on the mountain top, that would mean diluting the gospel message. The task is to proclaim a glorified Christ, and resist any commendation or praise for ourselves. The task is to carry our experiences at the top of the mountain down to the bottom where any and all could be transformed by the power of stories themselves. The task is to help those at the bottom of the mountain to be enchanted by the light and glory of Christ.

Over the past week I have been deeply touched by a poem which is part of Charles Mudie's collection of poems published as *Stray Leaves* in 1872. In the poem "I lift my heart to thee Saviour divine." Mudie writes:

1. I lift my heart to Thee,
Savior Divine,
For Thou art all to me,
And I am Thine;
Is there on earth a closer bond than this,
That my Beloved's mine, and I am His?

2. Thine am I by all ties,
And chiefly Thine,
For through Thy sacrifice
Thou, Lord, art mine;
By Thine own cords of love, so sweetly wound
Around me, closely I to Thee am bound.

3. To Thee, Thou Bleeding Lamb,
I all things owe,
All that I have and am,
And all I know;
All that I have is now no longer mine,
And I am not my own: Lord, I am Thine.

I am not sure if a spiritual awakening or a new appreciation of the faith story led Charles to pen this beautiful poem. But I am convinced of one thing; that to behold the glory of God, to feel your own darkness transformed by the radiance of God's light, to feel our lives turned right-side up, to feel the dew drops of salvation on your face and on your tongue-to tastes and see God's goodness, to glory in being delivered from the margins of life is way beyond words. And for Charles, the question still remains, is there on earth a closer bond than this, that my Beloved is mine and I am his? That I am my Beloved's. And my Beloved is mine. This is powerful stuff.

A revelation is knowing that we have been transformed and freed to walk with Jesus, even up the mountain and back. And as a result of our walk, we feel fortunate to share with others the joy and the majesty to which we have been partakers. Charles continues:

4. How can I, Lord, withhold
Life's brightest hour
From Thee; or gathered gold,
Or any power?
Why should I keep one precious thing from Thee,
When Thou hast given Thine own dear Self for me?

The joy of your transformation mustn't be kept to ourselves, nor do we have to build symbols as representations of our transformation. The glory of God is made alive when it is shared, when it is passed on to another, and so our joy is to come down from the mountaintop to the bottom of the mountain, just to share the stories of the light which changes human conditions and darkness, the light into which we ourselves have been called and transformed.

J.R.R. Tolkien, the famed children author in his poem *All that is gold does not glitter* stated that "Not all who wander are lost." Like the wandering Israelites in the wilderness who often felt lost, it often appear that we have been wandering a little too much, and that we may be lost. The good news, however, is that the God who called light out of darkness, has called us out of darkness and revealed to us the brightness of his glory. God's light shines on us in such a powerful way that we are not only enlightened by what we see or has been revealed to us, but the radiance of Christ's glory is such that we dare not lose our way. For how can you lose your way when there is light all around you? And because we cannot be lost, as faithful witnesses of Christ, we are to point the way of salvation so that none may be lost but may be kept in God's love. Charles concludes his poem with these prayerful words grounded in his abiding hope in the Beloved:

5. I pray Thee, Savior, keep
 Me in Thy love,
Until the world Thou sweep
 And me remove
To that fair realm, where, sin and sorrow o'er,
Thou and Thine own are one for evermore.

Amen.