

The Last Sunday of Epiphany

March 6, 2011

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2 or 99

2 Peter 1: 16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, but the Gospel reading is of the Transfiguration; we celebrate the Transfiguration on August 6. Why this reading on this day?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves just what is transfigured. The quick answer is Jesus. His face shines like the sun; His garments become dazzling white, so it says and perhaps that really does reflect the memory of that moment in the minds of Peter, James, and John. Perhaps, though, it is an attempt to put into words, to somehow explain, what happened up there on that mountain. Those three aren't eloquent users of words; they aren't scholars; they must use the words they know that will begin to tell people what that moment meant. So they fall back on the story of Moses and the burning bush, Moses' face shining because of his confrontation with God. And the cloud and the glory mean, throughout the Old Testament, that God is present.

So three sleepy, frightened fisherman try to find words to speak of the close presence of God, an event too great to be described.

Jesus does change on that mountain in more ways than His appearance. He is steeled for the final sacrificial act of His earthly presence. He turns toward Jerusalem and the cross.

And the world is changed; we are changed. The profound change is in the world's relationship to God.

That relationship may have been simple at first, the covenant "I will be your God and you will be my people," – a simple, personal relationship – had become, over the centuries, corporate and externalized.

The premise of the Temple in Jerusalem was that there was just one place to meet God. God was no longer to be found under the stars of a desert night or in a burning bush. And there was only one set of acceptable practices for worshiping God. Needless to say, all that was not God's idea.

So the simple, personal relationship of God and the ancients became complex, external, and ritualized.

What is transfigured or transformed on that mountain? God speaks and says, "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him." What has Jesus said, again and again?

His path leads down the mountain to Jerusalem and to the Temple.

Why do you suppose do we have the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple; what is He really doing? He is driving out all the practices, the accumulation of clutter that had come between God and His people. He is reasserting something that had been known and lost – that God is present, not behind a curtain in a building, but here and everywhere; that God demands no burnt offerings from His people but a sincere, profound faith. The Temple is a symbol of all those things that we have interposed between ourselves and our God.

That's what Jesus had preached in His words, in His healings, in His miracles, and He preaches it still to us.

Perhaps the three sleepy disciples did not hear God quite correctly; perhaps the voice said, "Have you listened to Him?"

In His Holy Name.