

A Quiet Glory

A Sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman
Transfiguration Sunday, Feb. 18, 2007
Text: Luke 6:27-36

Some stories are hard to talk about. They don't match our everyday experiences. Their not common or ordinary. The story of the transfiguration is one of those stories. And we have to resist the temptation to diminish it or reduce it to our everyday lives. Its more than we are normally about.

Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray. And all three gospels that tell this story – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – this experience of the transfiguration happens after Jesus has made it known that he is going to Jerusalem. After he has said “you have to pick up your own cross and follow me.” He's named the passion that is to come. In Luke's gospel Jesus has asked Peter: “Who do people say that I am?” and Peter has said – you are the Christ.

That's the context. This experience of transfiguration and transformation is not the same as going on a mountaintop and observing a beautiful sunset and feeling filled with the presence of God – as wonderful as that is, that's different. This experience is filled with the anticipation of what is to come. It's an epiphany story that leads us into Lent. And in Epiphany we experience the presence of God in a way we don't normally experience it, and it empowers and embraces us to be able to now enter our own darkness, our own temptation, our own struggle.

Jesus goes up on the mountain to pray – and in that moment with the three disciples he is transfigured and transformed in brilliant glory that is ever so quiet. This is not the glory of saying I am great. This is not the glory of trying to be the next best thing that comes. This is the glory of being filled with the presence of the Spirit of the One who was, and is, and will always be. And it gives Jesus courage to turn, to come down off that mountain, and to begin to walk to Jerusalem. Into the face of power. Into the face of struggle. And it gives the three disciples a glimpse of what they will again experience at the resurrection.

The context makes the story different.

Now you and I have experiences when we are transformed. You and I live in contexts where we have to be quiet and say “Okay God, what do I do?” The best story I know to illustrate this, and the only story I am going to tell today, is a story I heard this past Monday when I was attending a conference. I had the opportunity to meet a man named Bob Graetz, who is a Lutheran pastor. He and his wife Jeanie, back in the 50's, had gotten out of seminary, he was in his twenties, he was in Columbus, Ohio, and he was called to pastor a church in Montgomery Alabama. Now you know what was going on in the late 50's in Montgomery. It was the time of the Civil Rights movement beginning to happen, and before he went down to take that congregation – and Bob is a white man, and they didn't have enough black pastors, so he went to pastor this black church – but

before he went to take that call, the powers that be in the Lutheran church in Columbus, Ohio, sat him down and said: “Bob, we’ll let you go so long as you promise us you are not going to go down there and cause trouble.” Bob didn’t have any intention of starting trouble if he could help it, so he agreed to that.

He went to Montgomery, and it wasn’t long, it wasn’t long before his next door neighbor, who also headed up the NAACP youth program that was operated out of his church, it wasn’t long before this next door neighbor – whose name was Rosa Parks – refused to give up her seat on the bus. She was arrested.

As he shared this story he said: I had to sit down in the quiet and ask God – how can I pastor my people if I’m not involved in the things that they are involved in?

The black churches, in response to Rosa Parks arrest, were organizing what we now know as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. He had to think about the promise he had made to the Lutherans in Columbus, Ohio and about his being the pastor of these people in Montgomery, Alabama. And he decided that he was called to help them organize.

And so he sat in a room with about 20 other people – religious leaders and laity – working in the moment of this opportune time when the spirit was moving in Montgomery to bring about change. He sat in that room with Martin Luther King, Jr. and he heard Martin Luther King ask this question – If you are not ready to die for this movement, you need to get up and leave now. Are you ready? Because some of us surely are going to die.

And everybody in that room knew that Martin Luther King, Jr. would be at the top of that list to be killed. They also knew that the only white person in the room – Bob Graetz – would be at the top of that list as well. And they had to sit in that room and decide – and Bob said he listened to that challenge from Martin Luther King and he asked himself – “am I willing to die for my people and for this cause of justice?” And he stayed in the room with everyone else.

Over the next year or so, his home was bombed three times. And one time a bomb was thrown out in the front of their yard – and it had enough dynamite and power to blow up a city block – but for some reason it didn’t go off. And so they drove by it again and they threw another bomb to make the big bomb go off – and the second bomb did blow up, but the force of the bomb went over the big bomb – and it still did not blow up. He said that felt providential. And he was grateful.

He came and shared that story with us – and he said the experience of sitting in that room transformed his life forever. Because he was called out from his places of fear and called forth in a quiet glory of remembering the God who was, and is, and always will be.

Transfiguration – it pointed Jesus and the disciples toward Jerusalem. And it challenged all of them to say – what is it that we really want to live for? What really matters? And how am I going to get there?

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany. We are filled with the spirit of God's quiet and awesome glory. We now must decide how we will let the Spirit work in us. And as we decide, we now walk into Lent – into our fears, into our limitations, into our anxieties. This is where we deepen our faith. In prayer we begin – in trust we continue – with each other we journey forward. So may it be. Amen.