

Transfiguration; Last Epiphany A

Lections: Exodus 24:12-18; Ps. 2: 2Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17: 1-9

Exodus prepares us for Matthew today, for the early gospel listeners were aware of what scholars call the Moses template. A mostly Jewish audience that knew Moses as liberator and leader into a promised land will hear the author of Matthew frame Jesus in this pattern. “ Just as Moses is born under Pharaoh’s death sentence and risks death again after he kills a guard, Jesus has warned of Jerusalem and Herod’s death threats. As Moses received the law on Sinai’s mountain, Jesus has shared a sermon on the mount(ain). Moses interprets the law and the ethical rules; Jesus relocates and expands the moral imperatives – blessings for mourners, seekers of peace, the meek. “ Matthew adds a cloud to the scene knowing that his hearers will remember that God was with the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, as they travelled through the wilderness; Jesus is the location of the tabernacle now; he is the Holy presence of God. The shining face, the *figura* changed in proximity to God, and the fear of such closeness are all familiar. God’s voice and the voice of Jesus – listen and get up.

Whether this mountain top time is exactly true to what happened then, we know that a veil was lifted and what seemed ordinary about Jesus – his humanity – was now more than that. From a distance, a time of contemplation and an opportunity to be silent, the disciples came to recognize who was in their midst. This is an important insight to take with them as they re-entered the world below; there was going to be a lot to endure, the world of the cross, the world that has an ability to break itself – and us. The transfiguration affirms the divinity of Jesus; it retrains the eyes of the disciples to see below the surface. Here the Jesus of history is integrated with the Christ of faith. Now they can answer, ‘who do you say that I am?’ So the church hands us this image as we enter our Lenten journey.

Who tells you who you are? Our sense of self has come from family and friends and from our actions and our words; others see who we are when we say “I am not going to get to live my dreams” or “I am better than anyone else.” I believe that the church tells us that we are persons of promise, that God believes in each and every one of us. Our lives matter and what we do and say matters. And it is important how and when we gain a sense of God’s profound love for all of us. The writer Mary Gordon ([Reading Jesus](#)) tells of a time when she wandered into a Roman Catholic church in San Francisco; it was the feast of the transfiguration. The mixed Chinese and English liturgy was celebrated by a Chinese priest who spoke of a time in his own life when the veil between the visible and the invisible was torn away for him. He spoke of a mentally challenged adult with whom he worked. One day he asked the young man if he prayed. The man said he did pray and what he meant was that he listened. The priest asked what he heard. He replied, ‘I hear ‘you are my beloved.’” The priest told the congregation ‘this is what we should always be hearing.’ (p. 42).

Lent is such an important time in the Church year, when most of us choose to do things differently, at least a little bit. I think we try to listen to what God might be saying to us. Some of us join house churches, some read the insights of other people of faith. Some commit to more prayer. On Ash Wednesday this week you will hear the church’s formal invitation to a holy Lent.

Lent began early for me as I went to a film cited in our Lenten opportunities booklet. At the Bytown theatre, Of Gods and Men tells the story of a Christian mission witness among a Muslim village in Algeria in the last decade. Seven monks lived at the Tibhertine monastery staffing a medical clinic, selling their honey at the market, offering counsel and living in a witness of peace. The viewer gets to see the round of prayer, the singing of psalms, the Eucharistic feast nurturing and at the base of their lives. When fundamentalist Islamic groups begin a reign of terror against the government and military oppression and Christians are killed – some Croat Christians working on a hydraulic project, a couple of nuns – the monks are invited to leave. We see something of their communal decision making, their listening to their faith and to each other as they decide to remain where they are and serve those they would not want abandoned. In 1996 they were martyred, a small number among the many killed during the dark and bloody decade.

The movie will stay with me for a long time; I wept at its conclusion, not because of their deaths although that is a tragedy but because thanks to the director and the cinematographer I saw a beloved community, so loving and so sure of their faith that it left me speechless. The tenderness, the commitment to peace among difference, the ordinariness of their lives, the beauty of their souls – all of this touched me. This is a film about transfiguration; their faces changed in front of me and I knew I was seeing the face of God. I urge you not to miss this film. It won an Oscar for best foreign film last year; it is in French and Arabic with English subtitles.

God sets a table in the wilderness of fear, of difference, of broken-ness. Here we learn of the beloved status of neighbour even when it costs us something. The world is in turmoil and needs God's presence. And Jesus touches us and says, 'get up.'

Amen+

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