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Transfiguration Sunday: Matthew 17: 1-9
March 6, 2011

Today's story is in many ways the perfect bookend for the readings we heard way back in January at the start of the season we call Epiphany, today being the last Sunday of the same season. It seems like ages ago now, but we began Epiphany with the Magi – the three wise men – wending their way through the streets of Bethlehem, looking for the infant Jesus, falling on their faces in adoration the moment they saw him. Then the next Sunday we recalled the moment when God the Father spoke, his voice resounding over the waters of the Jordan River after Jesus receives his baptism by John, saying, "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," and now this morning at Epiphany's end we find three disciples, like the Magi, falling on their faces in consummate adoration, recipients of this fantastic and glorious vision of Jesus, the voice of the Father saying to them, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." The parallels are everywhere it seems.

I have to confess that I have often struggled to preach on this lesson in the past. I think we struggle in some way with this story and others like it in the gospels. There are, come to think of it, no real prescriptions here, no moral imperatives, or instructions to take home with us. About three weeks ago, I heard a guest lecturer who visited this church commenting how the No. 1 Americans ask no matter the context or the subject matter is, "What are we supposed to do now?" We are, as Americans, he said, fixated on action, on wondering what our response should be. Should we write a check? Are we supposed to shoehorn something else into our schedules? What are we supposed to do?

Jesus says give to the poor. Visit the sick. Take no thought for tomorrow. Feed the hungry. And we know what to do with that. We may go at it from different directions, we may acknowledge our propensity to miss the mark much of the time; but at least we can leave here with the self-sufficient satisfaction of knowing we can engage in something quantitative, something that demonstrates our willingness to get busy. As your clergy, I often worry about this pragmatism of ours – worry if we sometimes get the wrong message about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

I walk around the neighborhood, as do the rest of you, or stroll through a public place and strangers, seeing my collar, will ask me what I do, and after I tell them, they will sometime launch into a discussion about all the good they undertake, the charity they render, the volunteer hours they invest. I, of course, laud such benevolence. And then every once in a while someone might say, "Well, you know, I figure I don't need the church all that much. I mean, I'm a good person, try not to cheat anybody, and I figure I can do what you're doing at church on my own. That's what it's all about, you know."

Then I read this lesson this week, the disciples falling prostrate on the ground in front of the transfigured Jesus, the effulgent, resplendent glory of God emanating from him, Moses and Elijah, the great prototypical prophets of the Old Testament, standing next to him for a moment before disappearing in a gesture of total obeisance.

I think again about those Magi who fell to their knees before the infant Christ and the woman we know only as Mary, who throws herself at the feet of Jesus before breaking that jar of costly ointment over his body, and I think, "No; that's not what church is all about. That's not the purpose of why the face of Jesus shone like the sun in front of those hapless disciples. Jesus hardly came simply to make us good at being good. He came to awe us with his glory, to make us lose ourselves in the superabundant, uncontainable grace and beauty of God." Falling down on our faces in worship, finding ourselves caught up in a God and Savior so great we practically drown in his goodness: That's what Christianity is all about.

I think it no coincidence that three days before Lent, three days before most of us will start our Lenten disciplines, this is the reading appointed for today. It's as though the church in all its wisdom wants us to remember to put first things first. After all, we do Lent so well. We are so good at giving up and sacrificing and exercising restraint, ensuring we avoid expressing too much joy. We know how to approach each other and ask, "So what are you giving up for Lent this year? Isn't it awful? Oh well. Thanks be to God," thinking what God really wants from us is a little more abstention, a little more discomfort when the first thing God really wants from us is space in our souls wide enough to contain his irrepressible presence. Ours is a God who longs to make a glorious encounter with us.

Moses descends from a mountain in the book of Exodus, his face likewise shining like the sun, the divine presence so great upon him that he had to obscure it with a veil. Isaiah finds himself blindsided by a vision of God's holiness so great that he implores God to leave him, a sinful man, alone, and the Lord, of course, refuses to back away. And today, Jesus, who a few verses before had just told them he would soon suffer and perish, offers Peter, James and John a glimpse of who he is, of who he will be, and the only response they can generate is awe and worship. Lord, it is good for us to be here.

I love the question posed in an old church book: What is the chief end of man? For what purpose do you and I exist? Ask such questions to most institutions and the answer will be: You exist to consume, to buy, to contribute to the economy. Yet here in this place the answer is: You exist to enjoy God forever. The enjoyment of God: That is why you exist. You and I exist for something better than the fiscal year. This God has created you for transfiguration, for getting lost in wonder, awe, and praise.

I was with the confirmation class this past week and the group activity consisted of answering at least one question: What do you know or believe about the future? And the answers those seventh-graders gave were as dispiriting as anything I have ever heard. Global warming; gigantic landfills; rampant joblessness; perpetual wars; computers controlling our minds – this was their vision of the future. I thought, “What have we done?” We have let CNN sabotage our Christian hope such that our young believe our future will be nothing more than an endless stream of tragedy and misfortune (and that would be fine if there were no God) while Jesus has promised us – despite its crosses and passion and tragedy – a future of resurrection, of transfiguration.

C. S. Lewis wrote a book years ago entitled *The Problem of Pain*, another book whose attempt was to explain the meaning of suffering and tragedy within a Christian context. It is, of course, only right and necessary to consider such questions. Yet G.K. Chesterton once quipped that there is another problem with our existence and this problem is just as pressing as the problem of pain. He called it the problem of pleasure, beauty.

We are always, he said, so quick to ask, “Why is there suffering in the world?” when we seldom ask, “Why is there beauty in the world?” Why do we stare

transfixed at a work of art? What causes a person to sit at her desk and to spill words on a page in the form of poetry? Why does a suite of Bach make us rapt with emotion and with a longing to soar outside ourselves? What is it about human beings that make them want to sculpt or to study a Shakespearean play? There seems to be no evolutionary purpose for these things, no biological function. Chesterton knew, of course, what you and I know, what those disciples in our lesson knew, what God has known all along: that you and I desire to be near the beautiful, to take in something greater than ourselves; that we will worship something, it's just a matter of worshiping the proper thing.

It is our destiny, the ultimate gift, according to the Scriptures: That you and I will one day see God; that we will be near beauty itself; that we will pour ourselves out to the Savior who will pour himself out to us. We will worship the One who is the fullness of beauty. "You sent forth your fragrance," Saint Augustine once said, "and I drew in my breath and now I pant for thee. I have tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me and I was inflamed with desire for your peace." Now *that* is the Christian faith.

So what do we do this morning – the quintessential American question? We put ourselves in the place of those three disciples and we contemplate this Jesus in all his beauty, and worship. Think of him, as Augustine again once said, who is beautiful in heaven and beautiful on earth; who was beautiful in his parents' hands and was beautiful in his miracles; who was beautiful when under the scourge and was beautiful when inviting to life; who was beautiful on his cross and was beautiful in his grave; who was beautiful in his resurrection and who is now beautiful in glory. Worship him. Listen to him.

Yes, Lord, it is good for us to be here.

