

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
March 2, 2014  
Transfiguration  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 24:12-18  
Psalm 99  
Philippians 3:7-14  
Matthew 17:1-9

These weeks in the season after the Epiphany have been about discovering *who* Jesus really is. The Scripture lessons in the three year lectionary cycle have helped us in this discovery.

Each year, the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday after the Epiphany is devoted to the account of Jesus' baptism. You may recall that at that event, as Jesus submitted to the call of John the Baptist to prepare for the coming Kingdom, the divine voice from heaven spoke and proclaimed who Jesus really was.

And on the last Sunday after Epiphany each year, the Gospel lesson always takes us up the mountain where Jesus is transfigured in the presence of Peter, James and John. And, in parallel fashion to Jesus' baptism, the divine voice speaks again on the mount of transfiguration, again revealing his true identity.

Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah, the divine Son of God.

The mountain top experience from our Gospel lesson has parallels with Moses' mountain top experience on Mount Sinai, which is probably one reason the lectionary compilers paired these two texts.

The similarities are many, but I want to focus on a basic connection. As Moses encounters God on Mount Sinai, it becomes obvious that there is a radical difference between human beings and God, between the creature and the Creator, between the human and the Holy. (The OT lesson reminds us how rare it is that these human beings come into the presence of God on the mountain and live to tell about it!)

There is a great gulf between God and humans, but God takes action to bridge that gap. He does so through a covenant that he makes with the people, and he reveals himself through that covenant via a mediator. In the Old Testament, of course, Moses becomes the mediator of the covenant.

This is what is happening on Mount Sinai. The covenant between God and the people is being ratified, and God is culminating the process by giving Moses the tablets of stone.

Now, come with me to Matthew's account of the transfiguration. Peter, James, and John are on the mountain with Jesus. And suddenly, Jesus is totally transformed. It's clearly a "God moment," a manifestation of divine power where once again human beings realize that there is a great divide between them and the Almighty. This is why they are on their faces, terrorized.

But God's main objective is not to terrorize us. God's main objective is to love us and to save us.

So he takes steps once again to bridge the chasm. He speaks, and the voice says, “this is my beloved Son with whom I am fully pleased. Listen to him.”

Now Moses and Elijah have appeared, representing the covenant God first initiated with the people back on Sinai. But it is not them who is to be listened to and obeyed. It is Jesus who is to be obeyed.

Why? Because God is initiating a new covenant where He can make himself known to his people. And this new covenant also has a mediator. It’s the one who is being transfigured before everyone’s eyes on the mountain. It is the One who says to us each week: “this blood is the *new covenant* in my blood, shed for you, and for many for the remission of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

And in those words, and in his acts, the great divide between God and us is closed. In those words, and in those acts, a bridge of love is built across the chasm that alienates us from our Creator. In those words, and in those acts, a balm of healing is offered to those who are alienated from one another. In this Person, God makes himself fully known to us.

But he does not do so in a way we could predict or anticipate. Just prior to this incident, near the end of chapter 16, Jesus tells the disciples how he will mediate God’s new covenant. It will involve him going to Jerusalem, suffering mercilessly, and dying a criminal’s death on a cross.

And that's exactly what happens. Jesus and his inner circle will come down from the mountain, and Jesus will set his face toward Jerusalem and the task that awaits him.

Peter wants to memorialize this great event on the mountain. He wants to build a tabernacle, probably calling to mind the Feast of Tabernacles in the Old Testament which celebrated special times when God led the people.

Truth is, the most fitting shrine Peter could erect here on this mountain is a *cross*. For it is there where God's power will be fully seen.

We turn our focus and our lives this week to that time of year when we hear Jesus' call to go with him to Jerusalem. It's end result is glory, but the journey takes us through death -- death to self and sin. Because of this, it's a journey that cannot be entered into lightly. It calls on us to look deep within, to confront the darkness that is within us, and to cast ourselves on Jesus' mercy. It calls on us to examine our hearts, to discover whether we are following Jesus closely or merely at a distance. Quite simply, it is a journey that calls on us to die, so that we might truly live.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, it may not be Mount Sinai or the mount of transfiguration. But do not think for a minute that it is not a place of transformation. For the grace he gives us here will strengthen us, and will enable

us to follow him through the Lenten season all the way to Jerusalem, and to the light of the empty tomb on the other side.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.