

Weekend of Sunday, February 23, 2020
Transfiguration of Our Lord/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year A

First Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-21

Gospel Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

Sermon Title: “Shine Jesus Shine”

Theme

Shortly before he enters Jerusalem, where he will be crucified, Jesus is revealed to Peter, James, and John in a mountaintop experience of divine glory called the transfiguration.

Text

Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Sermon

In preparation for this Lent, it occurred to me that each of the liturgical seasons has a specific purpose. I don't recall learning this in seminary, but maybe I did and I forgot. Either way, this is what I discovered.

Advent is a season of preparation – we all know that. We prepare for the in-breaking of God's Messiah, the baby Jesus of Bethlehem.

Then we have the short season of Christmas which is simply a celebration of the nativity story.

Then follows the season of Epiphany and the readings for the weekends always have something to do with revealing Jesus as God's Messiah usually at the beginning of his public ministry.

I am going to leap frog Lent for the moment and move on to Easter. During the season of Easter the readings focus on what the Good News of the Resurrection means for the world.

And then we go into the long season of Pentecost where the readings are always the preaching and teaching and the performance of signs and miracles of Jesus. It is during this season that we do actually hear many of the readings in which Jesus was teaching his disciples his way, how to be more Christ-like, what we are to go and do likewise.

And then we start the cycle over again. So back to my discovery:

It occurs to me that while Lent is considered a season of preparation for the Lord's Passion, I think the purpose of the season of Lent is to observe Jesus and his actions. And while I suppose we do prepare ourselves for his Passion during the season of Lent, what I think is even more important to do is to simply observe him as he makes his way to Jerusalem to meet his Passion.

Along the way, we can do nothing to stop him, though we might like to. The readings for the weekends of Lent will feature stories about his ministry from John. The stories will be events in which we will hear about and observe his actions, but he will not require us to go and do likewise. So I think that Lent is a season of

observation. And I think it could be argued that it starts today, with the Transfiguration of Our Lord.

The Gospel Reading is a story about a bizarre event that happened and all we can do is observe it. That's all Peter, James and John could do too.

The Gospel Reading comes from the 17th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' inaugural address, his Sermon on the Mount, took place in chapter 5. Then for the next 11 chapters, Matthew covered Jesus' public ministry.

Already in chapter 16 (:21-23), or just a chapter ago according to the timeline of today's Gospel Reading, Jesus has already made the first prediction of his Passion. Following that proclamation Jesus said these words:

²⁴"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

In case you are wondering why I read that passage to you, the reason is because the Gospel Reading for today follows immediately. The lectionary editors chose to omit this part, but what Matthew actually wrote was,

¹*Six days later*, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John ...

And what follows then is the Transfiguration narrative.

The Transfiguration of Our Lord is a bizarre event. Clearly Peter didn't know what to make of the situation. Even when Peter suggested doing something, build little shrines for the three heroes who appeared there, he didn't. There was a moment ... and then it was gone.

Jesus was not teaching or preaching something for his inner circle to learn. He was not performing a sign or miracle that demonstrated some truth about his Heavenly Father or his own messianic ministry. It was just a bizarre event that Peter, James, and John were blessed to observe. And that is really all we can do too - is observe it.

The Transfiguration is a bizarre event, that acts like a bridge between the preaching and teaching, performing signs and miracles ministry of Jesus, and what came next.

In chapter 19, Jesus made his decision to go to Jerusalem, ^{23:37}"the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it." He knew what awaited him and yet he went on – and all we can do is observe it.

In chapter 21, Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and was heralded as a hero, even Messiah. He knew his own people were two-face and that the whole city would turn on him and cry out for his death and yet he went on – and all we can do is observe it.

In chapter 26, Jesus celebrated the Last Supper. He said, "This is my body and this is my blood that I pour out for you and all people for the forgiveness of sins." He knew that in the next 24 hours he would be betrayed by one, denied by another, abandoned by all, made the subject of a mockery of a trial, beaten nearly to death, and then nailed to a cross naked and ashamed for all the world to see. He knew all this would happen and yet he went on - and all we can do is observe it.

In at the end of chapter 27, Jesus was dead and in the grave. I've confessed this before, each year I secretly hope it turns out differently knowing it never will. He knew how it would all turn out and yet he went on – and all we can do is observe it.

Today we observe the Transfiguration of our Lord Jesus. There he is, shining like the sun, in clothes that are dazzling white. And all we can do is observe it.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

We Lutherans are not very good at this. Historically, with our hospitals, nursing homes, adoption agencies, immigration efforts, disaster relief, hunger efforts, etc. we are more action oriented. There is nothing wrong with that, and a lot right about

that. But along the way I think we have lost the spiritual discipline of contemplation, if we ever had it. Other Christian traditions are better at it.

I've spoken a time or two about my pilgrimages to the Abbey of Gethsemane, but I don't recall telling you that at almost any time day or night, there will be one or two monks in the sanctuary staring at the sanctuary candle or the icon for the season. What are they doing you ask? Meditating on the mysteries of the faith. I wish we could recover that somehow. Because, while it is important to grow in Christ-likeness, some of what Christ is will remain an unattainable mystery to us, this side of eternity. The best we can do is observe him.

In the Transfiguration of Our Lord, Jesus asks nothing of us, no notes to take, no lessons to be learned, no "go and do likewise," no "Raisin' the Bar Challenge." What he was doing, he must do on his own. And that is nothing less than save humanity from itself and open the door to eternal life, closed by human sin. This is something we cannot do for ourselves no matter how badly we want to or what we are capable of doing. No, today is simply a day to observe what he alone has done, and give him thanks and praise that he did.

Prayer

Oh Lord God, you sent your Son as an example of the godly life, and yet much of what he did we simply cannot do, simply cannot get our heads around, nor would it matter if we could. All we can do is observe it. Bless us this holy season of Lent that begins this coming Wednesday, with a spirit that slows us down so that we are able to contemplate the mystery of your great love for us shown us in the same Jesus Christ our LORD. Amen