

Transfiguration, February 27, 2022

Luke 9:28-43

“Tell us, grandfather,” came a voice from the rear of the cell.

“Tell us again of the time when his face shone like the sun.”

The only response was a long pause—

an almost endless pause during which the other prisoners

could sense the older man gathering his strength—

a pause disturbed only by the whispered commands

of mothers to children to hush now and listen.

Finally, an weary voice broke the stillness.

“Looking back on it now,” Peter said,

“we should have recognized what was happening to him and to us. . .

but we—James and John and myself—

we were too caught up in the rapture of the moment.

There we were, standing with the Master when, all of a sudden,

like water leaking through an earthen dam--

all of a sudden the light started seeping out of him. . .

at first in a trickle and then in a stream.

Gradually, it grew brighter and brighter and stronger and stronger

until we were convinced that his very bones would be consumed

by the heat and brilliance of the light pouring out of him.

Our eyes burned at the brightness

and our hearts pounded with fear

at the overpowering feeling that we were standing

in the very presence of the Holy One of Israel.

It was as if the Last Day had finally come

and we were naked before the terrifying gaze of Eternal One.

I remember thinking that this must have been how Moses felt

standing before the burning bush and hearing the voice of the Lord

coming from within that flame; or how Elijah must have felt at the end of his life

when he looked up and saw the chariots of fire coming for him.

We were frightened and elated at the same time—

frightened because we knew we were unworthy to be there,

and yet elated that the Master had allowed us to see him like this.

Nevertheless, despite our joy, we hugged the ground for dear life
and prayed for darkness to cover us. And then our prayer was answered.
A cloud came and hid him somewhat. . .and we looked up and saw Father Moses
and Father Elijah standing beside him—one on either side.

Strangely enough, it appeared as if they were supporting and comforting him—
as if they knew that something dreadful was about to happen to him.
And yet, it also looked as if they were bowing down before him,
acknowledging that he was greater than they were.

And then came a flash. . .literally, a flash. . .and his glory swallowed them up completely.
Just as the moon and stars disappear at the rising of the morning sun,
so their brightness simply faded from view in comparison to his—
as if, from that moment on, they would never again be as important as he was;
as if they were to be lesser lights and he was to be the greater.

Now, I know it must sound as if I understood a great deal
of what was happening back then, but I really didn't.
I guess the light had blinded not only my eyes but my heart as well—
because even though he told us on the way down the mountain
to say nothing about this to anyone. . .and, then not long after,
hinted at what would happen to him, that he would have to suffer and die—
even then we didn't understand. . .or didn't want to.

All we wanted to talk with him was about how wonderful
it had felt to be in the glorious presence of the Divine. . .
but he knew—and he was trying to tell us—
that to be chosen by the Holy One isn't always wonderful or easy. . .
because being chosen means being chosen to die—
to give up your life for the sake of others.

He said much the same later on when he spoke of those strange things
about our being baptized with his baptism—
meaning that we, too, would have to share his death.
Being willing to follow me, he said, means being willing
to bear my cross with me—and that is no easy task.
And yet, as we were to find out later, there is no greater or grander a task than that.

To be asked by him to lose your life—to give up all that you are and have for his sake—
to have the chance to sacrifice all those things that everybody else considers important—
to let go of this life and lose it--is the only way to find real life.

But, my friends, let me remind you once again that we didn't understand any of that at the time.
Blinded on the mountain by light, we were soon blinded by tears.
When he died, it was as if the light of the world went out.

We who had once yearned for the cover of darkness
to hide us from the piercing glare of his light,
we now longed for his light to return and scatter our darkness and fear.

You see, that Friday and Saturday after the crucifixion, we lived in fear and trembling
because we were afraid of being discovered as his disciples.

We were afraid of being arrested and punished as he had been.

We were afraid of having to carry the cross as he had.

And so every knock at the door and every tap at the window
caused our hearts to leap into our throats.

But on Sunday, when the news of his resurrection came to us. . .

and when we saw him alive again that evening, our darkness ended and our fear died.

We were no longer afraid to speak of him publicly;

no longer afraid of being arrested or jailed or threatened with death. . .

because we knew that death is not the final champion

but that God is. . .that love is. . .that life is.

You see, we who follow him know how the story will end.

We know that life will ultimately triumph over the grave

and that light will ultimately conquer the darkness.

And so we can live differently before the end comes.

We don't have to try and protect anything anymore,

or try and save ourselves any longer, or try and hold on to the things we have.

Instead, in him, in our Lord Christ, we are free—free to risk everything;

free to live for him--and, when the time comes. . .and it will come. . .

free to die for him and to die with him,

because we believe that in exchange for our dying, he will give us life.

And that is why whenever we eat his holy meal,

why we must remember the freedom we have—the freedom to give everything away,

including our lives if he wants them—because we have the confidence

that he is waiting to give us a brand new life in return.”

Then, taking a small loaf of bread in his hands, Peter gave thanks, broke it into pieces
and passed them around to the others with these words:

“Take this bread and eat it, for it is the Lord's own body.

Share the bread of life and be of good courage. . .for Christ will come again.”

And as they shared the bread in the quiet of the dungeon,

they could hear the tramp of the soldiers' feet marching down the hallway.

Suddenly the door to their cell was flung open permitting the frenzied screams

of the crowd and the roar of the beasts in the arena to be clearly heard.

“Get up, old man,” shouted one of the soldiers.

“You, the man called Peter, get up! Your time to be crucified has come.
It is time for you to meet your Christ.”

And as the soldiers grabbed him and shoved him out the door,

Peter’s voice, no longer tired and worn out, but strong now and full of hope,

Peter’s voice called out to those left behind:

“My children, stand firm, and don’t be afraid, for Christ is risen.”

And, as with one voice, those remaining the cell cried aloud:

“Christ is risen, indeed!”

And into their hearts the light of hope came. . .

and into the darkness of their cell, the light of Christ shone. . .

and they were not afraid anymore. They were not afraid anymore.

Amen. SDG