

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Last Sunday After The Epiphany
11 February 2018

Scripture readings:

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

This text has always puzzled me and I think early in my ministry was not a welcome text because I just don't get stuff like this. The older I get the more I'm getting, I think. It has to do with how we hear these things.

Now here is Jesus on a mountaintop. Well, we talk about mountaintop experiences - extraordinary moments in our lives when things are hunky-dory, everything is all right, we're in a good mood and see things clearly. Our confusion is gone, our insecurities have disappeared, and we're sure about something or another. Well, here is Jesus on a mountaintop with his buddies, and all of a sudden a couple of other people from pre-Christian scripture appear - Moses and Elijah, representing, according to the theologians and scholars over the centuries, the Law and the Prophets, the tradition of faith that has preceded Jesus. They're in the presence of Jesus' real close friends - Peter, James, and John. And we get the Charlton Heston stuff of movies with a cloud, known technically in Hebrew as a *shekinah*, which is always an indication of God's presence, and, if that's not good enough for you, you also have a voice (which is always a baritone and always male) speaking and saying to and about Jesus, "*This is my Son the Beloved. I am pleased with this man. Listen to what he has to say.*"

Well, that's like a movie for which you have to pay twelve dollars instead of six dollars. I mean this is good stuff. Not only are *they* present, the past is present with them, God is with them. The affirmation of Jesus and who he is is made not by any social or political system, but by God himself. They know who they are, they know what they're doing, they know why they're there, they love it, and they want to stay there.

You won't be here today much more than an hour, especially today since there's no music [*laughter*], but I think it's not too much of a stretch for us to understand that every time we gather here, in a sense we come to experience a transformative moment in our lives, a transfigurative moment in our lives, a moment that affirms something which we are then not allowed to stay here and continue to enjoy, but which we must carry with us out of the front doors. *Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.* This transformation, this transfiguration, which we receive here by listening to the good news of God's love in Christ and celebrating the sacraments, then goes with us back down the hill into our daily lives and into the places where we live and work and have our being the rest of the week. We do, after all, claim and proclaim that we are, by virtue of God's act in baptism, members of the Body of Christ. I don't think it's much of a stretch to remember that in baptism God says to us through the sacrament of the Church the same words that God says to Jesus on the mountain today: "*You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased.*" And inasmuch and in as effective a way as possible as we participate in the Body of Christ, the message to the world is the same: "*Listen to them.*" They are communicators of the gospel. That's our job. That's our identity.

It's interesting that the mistake was made in the bulletin today of printing another gospel text. There's another fact that I find fascinating, and that is that the commemoration of the transfiguration of our Lord has three possibilities in the life and calendar of the Church in a year. For us it occurs today, the last Sunday after the Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent. In other calendars the sixth of August is the day to remember the transfiguration among Lutherans and sometimes among others. Now why would that be? It's a very complex story. It's ancient. It's hundreds and hundreds of years old. Part of it has to do with campaigns against the Turks and Muslims, believe it or not, even back then. But also it was known that Jesus' transfiguration occurred forty days before the crucifixion. The thirteenth of September was celebrated in calendars of the Church as the Triumph of the Cross, the day that the cross triumphed by virtue of Jesus being crucified on it. Therefore, forty days before the thirteenth of September is August sixth.

Our fiend in Rome this morning was not dealing with the transfiguration text because in the Roman calendar the text for the transfiguration comes on the second Sunday in Lent. So there you've got it, folks. Three options. I think it was done in case a secretary made a mistake you would get the transfiguration anyway sometime somewhere along the line! [*Laughter*]

What I found important this morning was that our friend in Rome was celebrating the 160th anniversary of the

first appearance of Our Lady at Lourdes. Today in the Roman Church is the day to remember the sick and the infirm. The text that the pope was addressing this morning had to do with the business of healing lepers. The Holy Father made the point that it was commonly thought in those days that if you touched a leper, you became polluted. Now we're way more advanced today in the 21st century, aren't we? Do you remember what people thought about AIDS? I remember the discussions in my first parish of the idea that maybe it was time for us to start using little glass individual cuplets for sanitary reasons. And I said, "*No, this is precisely the time when churches throughout the world need to throw those things out to prove that we have intelligence and that this disease is not communicated that way.*"

And so here is Jesus at the receiving end of a long and complex religious tradition which is predicated on the business of preserving personal purity, keeping oneself clean, keeping oneself kosher, keeping oneself orthodox, keeping oneself right with God. Jesus, rabbi and teacher that he was, turns the whole thing upside down and not only treats the lepers as fellow human beings, he gets over his fear of being polluted by them and touches them. And instead of him being polluted by that touch, guess what happens? *They* are purified by it. Well, isn't that nice, but what does that have to do with us today? Absolutely everything!

There is a fear in this land that if people come here from other countries, they will pollute us, they will rape us, they will bring crime to us. You will hear statistics, won't you, of how this is proven. Now I shall tell you in a city that is 90 plus percent Hispanic, the crime rates will be higher among the Hispanics. Let's be reasonable. There is such a thing as Aristotelian Logic, friends.

But that's not the issue for Christians. The issue for Christians is how we deal with the woman in the gutter, how we deal with the person afflicted with leprosy, how we treat the addict, how we regard God's children personally when our opportunity to encounter them, think about them, and care for them arises - no matter what the religious organization, the political organization says. Jesus was not supposed to communicate with the lepers. They brought pollution. But Jesus wasn't afraid because he wasn't worried about being polluted. He was transfigured. He was observed by God as God's Son, and he carried a perfection, a purity, a cleansing to those in need.. He touched them and they were healed. That's not what the Church told him. That's not what the state told him. He was indiscriminate with his loving of people - including the tax collectors and others.

So we come every Sunday, friends, to the top of this mountain to be reaffirmed in our baptism and to hear again God's words spoken directly to the Body of Christ - and that means to you and to me - that *you* are my child. I am pleased with you and as a part of my body, you are transfigured into something different. You have a vision and a message from God which we are not invited to sit around here and enjoy just by ourselves. In this transfiguration we are taught that to wall ourselves in is not correct. Let us build walls here for you, Jesus, for you, Elijah, for you, Moses.

Have you ever heard of Constantine? His mother, Helena, is big in the Church. She was a great woman behind a great man. Her job was to run around the world and find all of the places where everything happened and pieces of the true cross and where this took place and that took place. If you ever go to St. Peter's in Rome, there's a huge statue of Helena holding a cross. St. Helena figured out where the Mount of the Transfiguration was, and guess what she did? The first thing she did was to build three churches! [*Laughter*] How we get it wrong!

Your transfiguration as a member of the Body of Christ is not to sit here and enjoy that gift, but to take it with you into the world - to touch the leper; to welcome the outcast, the foreigner, the immigrant; to ignore the false standards that are given to you, and to believe that God's commission is greater.

I do have a question about illegal immigration because I don't think that is the question. We're not talking in this country about illegal immigration. We're talking about xenophobia. We are talking about being afraid of others, and we are talking about being afraid of others who are darker than we. That's really where it boils down, friends.

Did the Pilgrims immigrate legally? Were the slaves who were dragged here against their will legal immigrants? Who owned this place? And why aren't we asking them about immigration regulations? Those to whom it belongs, who are now in cages called reservations.

We need to believe, contrary to popular understandings, that Jesus touches lepers and is not polluted but shares his purity. We need to defeat our own hypocrisies, and we need to stop hiding behind false arguments. As Christians we look at the world as populated with our brothers and sisters. And be careful, friends, because it is those who wish to make this a Christian nation, I believe, who would do it the greatest harm. It is *not* a Christian nation,

thank God! It is a nation which allows us to be Christians and to show that Christianity to the world and not legislate it. This is a beautiful time for us as God's children, an extraordinarily wonderful opportunity to share God's love at all times in all places with all people. That's not a new idea for us. That's who we are constituted to be as the Church.

And that's why I believe we return every Sunday to be transfigured ourselves because we slip, we fall, we get it wrong often, we make our mistakes, we are happy to return to our old ignorances, prejudices, and hatreds. But as Christians we are not happy to allow those to remain. The problem of building walls is if we do, we build all that ignorance, prejudice, and hatred inside - inside of ourselves and into the Church. No, you may not stay here. No, you may not erect tabernacles. You must take this transfigured reality, the purity and light and clarity of God's love with you into your life today when you go down from this mountain and throughout the week. Maybe we ought to celebrate this feast three times a year or every Sunday.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.