

Psalm 99 2.27.25 Bill Uetricht Transfiguration

I'll admit to you that I seldom know what to do with Transfiguration Day. I often find it hard on this day to figure out what to preach. As I am preparing for a sermon on this day, I often sit at my desk and stare straight forward, wondering if anything new will pop into my little brain.

The story for this day is somewhat weird; it feels really anti-modern. Some dead guys show up on a mountain with Jesus, whose face and clothes turn dazzling white. Eventually, a cloud overshadows Jesus, the dead guys (Moses and Elijah) and Jesus' friends, who have come up with him onto the mountain. And then a voice speaks from the cloud. I mean this is weird. What do you make of all this? And what kind of handy advice can flow from such an experience. I don't want to leave people without some kind of agenda.

In some ways, Transfiguration feels agenda-less, somewhat useless to me. One thing I am not is a preacher who has an agenda of uselessness. I want to say something that makes a difference, changes attitudes, changes behavior. I am the kind of person who appreciates the mindset of those who in the midst of a project to be done scream out: "Don't just stand there; do something." Transfiguration feels like a lot of standing, a lot of staring, a lot of doing nothing. The disciples in the text almost fall asleep. If you know me, doing nothing is not my cup of tea. It isn't my thing, doesn't float my boat.

Hmmm...a lot of staring...a lot of standing...a lot of doing nothing. That doesn't attract me. But maybe there is something there. Maybe I need to pay attention to my sense of uselessness.

In our Psalm for today, you and I are taken back to two of the primary traditions of Israel—the temple tradition and the Mosaic tradition of liberation or freedom. It is the temple tradition that is calling my name now. Walter Brueggemann calls this tradition the

“tradition of presence.” The temple in Israel’s later history was thought to be the focus of the presence of God. It was a special place to be discovered by the awe and wonder of life. It was a huge edifice that provided people a sense that God indeed is holy, different, mysterious, beyond description. It enabled worshipers, who were used to the reality of the king, to be grasped by the unsurpassable royalty of the God of the universe. Listen to the Psalm today: “The *Lord* is king; let the peoples tremble. The Lord is great in Jerusalem, [the city where the temple is]. He is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!”

This “tradition of presence” takes us to beholding, to seeing in a new way, to staring with your mouth wide open, to sensing your uselessness.

In a world where everything we do is thought to be so important, where everything our kids are involved in is believed to be so vital, where the tiny tyrannizes too many of us, where the media we know seems so preoccupied with the banal, the most base, the ugly, the violent, you and I would do well to allow ourselves to be taken to the big, the sacred, the holy, the “tradition of presence.”

I was intrigued by a quote from Jonathan Ortberg this past week: "For many of us, the great danger is not that we will renounce our faith. It is that we will become so distracted and rushed and preoccupied that we will settle for a mediocre version of it. We will just skim our lives instead of actually living them."

The “tradition of presence” won’t let us skim over life. It won’t permit us to be so distracted by so many things that we miss out on the really important things. It will grasp our attention, so that we behold life, see it in a new way.

Transfiguration won’t put up with all our distractions, letting us get stuck in the petty and the puny. Transfiguration wants us to stop being

so busy, so preoccupied with everything we think is so important. It wants to take us up on a mountain, overwhelm us with a cloud, frighten us with our smallness, cause us to stand and do nothing. It wants to reacquaint us with some dead guys who link us to a grand tradition. It wants us to see the glory of God, discovered in the face of Jesus.

Luke tells us that it was about *eight* days after Jesus had taught about his upcoming suffering when he was transformed on the mountain. Eight days...the number of wholeness or completeness (7) plus one. This is the day of the new creation, life as it ought to be. We are getting the big picture here. We are getting a foretaste of the feast to come, an experience of resurrection. The light is shining on the great future that life is going toward.

It is worth our while, therefore today, to be overcome with awe. Life has this amazing ability, if we are truly open to its depths, to shut our mouths, to drive us to our limits, to open us to something much grander, much more spectacular than ourselves, our problems, our small dreams, our anxieties, our preoccupations, our addictions, our opinions.

Transfiguration wants to take us to that something more spectacular right before we head into Lent, the season of suffering. Sometimes in the midst of the suffering we can forget about the big and the spectacular. We can look at Jesus and think that he is simply a failure. The light shines today on Jesus so that we know that the one who has just told his disciples that he is going to suffer, going to be crucified, going to be a victim of the world's powers, is seen as the one who reveals to us the holy God. God's greatness and holiness is not just seen in his power, but more in his suffering love, his willingness to get messy with the world's pain.

This insight leads us back to Psalm 99 to discover the second great tradition mentioned in it, and that it is the tradition of liberation and

freedom. In this Psalm that speaks of the bigness, the greatness, the holiness of God, we hear these words: “Mighty king, *lover of justice*, you have established *equity*, you have executed *justice* and righteousness in Jacob.” God is not only wonderful, grand, and big; our God is a God of justice, a God who is about equity, a God who is about freedom and liberation. The big God of the universe is so big that he can leave behind his bigness to care for the left out, the poor, the vulnerable, the oppressed, those held in bondage.

This is the freedom story, a story that reaches its height in the Exodus story, in Israel’s being set free from the narcissism of the Pharaoh. You can’t tell Israel’s story without this story. You can’t tell our story without this story. In today’s text about the Transfiguration, we experience Moses and Elijah speaking of Jesus’ *departure*. The word for “departure” is exodus. Jesus is leading his people toward freedom, liberation.

Now I know that it is very hard to trust that story when it seems that the world is unfair, that those in charge are often unjust. I know when you look at the world and it seems that the evil prosper, it is hard to believe that God is on the side of freedom and justice. But that is our claim. God, the big God, the holy God, is not some self-preoccupied God whose concern is only himself and his personal glory. No, God, the big God, the holy God has a heart for those who suffer, which really is the point of the cross. The suffering of the world is the suffering of God.

Today the light of transfiguration is shining on the one who is going the way of the cross, the one who so beheld the holy *and* just God that he poured out his life for the sake of the people God sees with a tender heart. Jesus is going to the cross because he loved people, and he embraced the folks that the world often doesn’t include. He’s going to the cross because freedom, liberation is what the God he trusts is all about.

If we get that, I suspect we won't see Transfiguration as agenda-less. Yes, it's worth our while to stand there and not do something for more time than the culture will want you to. Yes, it's worth your while to gaze at the light, beholding it, losing yourself in it. But the mountain ought not be your home for too long. You and I, eventually we have work to do—the work of justice and freedom, the work of joining a suffering God in making this world a better place for all.

Ya, he's a beautiful savior that compels us to drop our jaws and fall to the ground. But his true beauty is to be discovered in his cross-shaped compassion and love. We truly behold his holiness as we get to work on the ground to live out that love and compassion.