

Epiphany 8

March 4, 2019

Zion North Branford

I love these texts, which are used for the feast of the transfiguration. A day in the Church year that points us to the radiant face of God, and reminds us how this world that we move through and consider ordinary is really a kaleidoscope of layers and spirals of meaning - The Transfiguration gives us an image of this world as God has created it to be -the fulfillment of creation, "afame with God's light."

And here we are at the edge between epiphany and lent - taking a moment to watch as God breaks through our limited understanding of reality, and to begin the journey with Jesus to repent, or turn ourselves toward God.

So, here we are North Branford! With the disciples on the mountain, looking on at Jesus in confusion, excitement, loss, wonder. Because in that moment that the disciples saw Jesus changed in dazzling clothes in glory with Moses and Elijah - the disciples stepped into a "thin place" - a place where the rules about past, present, and future no longer apply - a place where all Creation shines with the Glory of God and joyfully points to its Creator.

And in that moment, the disciples were filled with joy, and really wanted to hold onto that feeling - To get their hands around it.

We do the same thing on Sunday mornings, when we come to the altar, the place of transfiguration, and reach out our hands for each other, and for the bread and the cup, so that we can get our hands around God. At that same moment we hold onto the crucified body and the resurrected hope.

Peter's request is so natural, so innocent - It is good for us to be here. His request to camp out is an echo of the Jewish Festival of Booths, which involves the setting up of tents and reminds the Jewish people of Yahweh's protection while they were wandering in the wilderness.

And it is maybe a foreshadowing as well of the love in the Christian communities for our spaces of worship, for those places that help us put our hands on God. The Celts have a word for places like that mountaintop where the disciples gathered with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah - they call them "thin places."

These are places in the world where the present reality of existence is worn thin, like a blanket well-used. And it is in these places that the living, dead, and other beings we don't have names for, can come face to face.

When I have heard of these places, it is usually in reference to the top of some far away mountain or one of the Holy Islands, like Iona in Scotland. Or in stories like this one in our Gospel today. I don't usually think of them as being right in front of me - as near as we are to the altar.

Over the last two thousand years, Christians the world over have wrestled with how we encounter God physically on this earth, and shared Peter's enthusiasm to build places that hold onto that feeling of "thinness" of direct encounter with the transcendent - The eternal Divine.

The incredible truth, is that we as a community of faith over the centuries have believed that our sanctuaries, any place that we gather for praise and worship, is a thin place - A place where God takes on flesh and blood, a place where we stare into the living eyes of Christ and those who have gone on before us into Glory.

To demonstrate this, in many of our churches there are carved images behind the altar images of prophets, saints, and martyrs, heroes of the faith. So that as we look at the altar and prepare to meet God face to face, we are joined with the faces of those prophets, saints, and martyrs, staring back at us from eternity.

And not only that, but these images, often take the likeness of people who lived and died in that town, so not only are we joined by the prophets, saints, and martyrs, but we can see and feel those we have loved who are no longer with us Present, and sharing in our praise of God from across existence. We really do "join our voices with angels and archangels in their hymn of unending praise." But our reality, and the story of that day on the mountain top do not end there in that "thin place."

Jesus does not rebuke Peter (and we know from experience that Jesus doesn't hold back!) for wanting to stay on the mountaintop surrounded by Glory. But the story of Jesus's life and ministry moves onward. The story continues from the mountaintop down to the streets. From the heights of glory, into the valleys of pain, Jesus goes out into the crowds and is met with requests for healing. And a boy comes forward possessed by a demon and Jesus casts it out and then chastises the crowds.

From this point on in Luke's Gospel the tone turns, and Jesus is described as "setting his face on Jerusalem". He single-mindedly walks toward the Cross - Just as we are about to walk through lent to the cross. How many times I wonder, do we see this pattern repeated in our own lives? When we are standing in a "thin place". Filled with the glory of God, and immediately move into the depths of pain or suffering or human brokenness.

How do we as the Church witness to both the transfigured Glory of God, and the reality of pain in our society? How do we individually make silent space for awe and relationship with God, as well as forging a path into the world that leads us into places of destruction and devastation? How do we hold on to the glorious history of God's redeeming creation and at the same time look forward to that everlasting redemption for all the cosmos? How do we hold onto the excruciating hope of the resurrection while cradling the crucified body of Jesus?

I believe that it is this liminal "thin space" of delight and despair into which we are called to live as a Church, and that it is our mission is to receive and rejoice in the dazzling beauty offered here at this table, and then to go out into the world proclaiming the beauty of what we have seen in those places that feel farthest from it.

May God give us the strength of heart and body to do this work.