

So, the New Testament scripture which Leigh just read, the Transfiguration, is puzzling. I know it is about Jesus but I've usually ended up preaching on it as if it's about Peter and the other two. Not as an easy way out, but as the only way out. Being human and seeing the scene from the only angle we can, we visualize it from the perspective of Peter, or John or James. Heads spinning in a cartoon-like way, they witness the change in Jesus' appearance, then Elijah and Moses (two dead guys) appear, and then, when Peter has either the courage or the nerve to talk to them, to suggest he build something for them, after all that - a cloud descends, a voice declares Jesus his son, and the disciples react in the only possible way to react, they drop to the ground, in fear, in awe. They've got it!

This scripture is telling us something about Jesus, something that could not, that cannot be expressed in words. Even Titian and Raphael only capture a glimpse of the experience in their paintings. The experience of Jesus - praying, becoming dazzling white, being joined by Elijah and Moses and irritated by Peter - all of this is something not made for explanation or interpretation. Any temptation I might have to dismiss this event as an hallucination, is dispelled when I remember it is also in Mark and Luke almost word for word; and in one of the pastoral letters as well. This is no accident.

This spectacular, inexplicable event has a meaning that is central to our journey through the Christian year. We encounter it on this pivotal Sunday. We are no longer in Epiphany and not yet in Lent. Lent begins next week, the first Sunday is a week from today. The Transfiguration plays a roll thematically. It makes clear to the disciples who Jesus is. Yes, we've been learning who Jesus is in Epiphany - we've seen him baptized, tempted, challenged; we've heard his wisdom; and seen his miracles. None of that is to be discarded. Seeing Jesus transfigured does not leave any part of him out. Seeing Jesus radiant, literally shining like the sun or a star, bathed in a white so dazzling it is difficult to look straight at; and the pronouncement from the cloud - witnessing all this pulls back the curtain of Jesus the man and reveals Jesus the Messiah; witnessing all this, at this moment, informs the events of Holy Week, makes them more horrific and more heroic.

This transfiguration of Jesus includes having Moses and Elijah with him. We are shown Jesus at this moment when he is moving toward fulfilling the mission for which he came. As he stands at this point in time - fulfilling the law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) - he is affirming his identity as Messiah, affirming that his identity does not abolish any of Moses' or Elijah's words. Yes, he brings other commandments: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." He brings these words and embraces history at the same time. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

There is no separation, the bible shows us, between God's words on the tablets, God's words in the mouth of the Prophets, and God's word: Jesus. This account of the Transfiguration mirrors Moses' experience in Exodus on Mt. Sinai. Ascending a mountain, being surrounded by a cloud, a cloud from which comes God's voice, accompanied by the fierce and living light of fire. When Jesus goes up the mountain, we know we are in safe hands, we know that Jesus is not only continuing the Mission, but that Jesus is the mission. We know that Jesus knows what will happen, or at the very least, we know Jesus knows that he is in His Father's hands.

In an almost 180 degree turn, what we have to remember and embrace is that Moses' trip up the mountain is our history, too. That before we confidently followed Jesus up the mountain; Moses a man, a reluctant leader, went up a mountain with no idea what would happen there.

We carry that history too. We are scared and reluctant to go somewhere without knowing what will happen there and how it will affect us - we carry the humanity of Moses and Peter; AND we carry the knowledge that Jesus is the messiah; that Jesus knows what awaits him.

So we follow Jesus up another hill - not a mountain this time, but ascending the hill at calvary carrying a 50 pound wooden cross - it couldn't feel more like a mountain. We follow a messiah but we feel the pain of a human.

We want the messiah to be what is manifested on the cross, the messiah who knows what will happen and can transcend pain; can perhaps free himself. But Jesus is of two natures - human and divine - and both hang on the cross. Both are expressed in what he says from the cross. From promising paradise and offering forgiveness to arranging care for his mother and rebuking his father who seems absent - it is Christ, the messiah who hangs from the cross and it is Jesus the man there as well.

Even though we think we know what will happen on the top of that hill of Calvary, there is still hesitancy in our steps. Many of us would not follow him up that Hill at all instead preferring to get a front row seat at the resurrection.

But there is no resurrection without the heavy wooden cross. If you go straight to that front row seat without following Jesus to Calvary, you might be treated to a performance of resurrection or a reflection of resurrection in the appearance of Spring flowers, but it will all be out there, happening in someone else, happening somewhere else.

We can't preach the transformation Jesus brings without laying out the path to it. We can't go directly from this glorious Transfigured Jesus to the triumphal risen Jesus and expect to arrive any way other than unchanged. To experience Resurrection, there is only one path. The path strewn with humanity's sins, big, destructive, willfully blind. The path so crowded, we can barely navigate it carrying our own sins. They keep getting caught on the collective sin. We have no choice but to leave our sin attached and try to make our way to Easter carrying this burden. Ironically, when we've stopped trying to separate, we look around and see that we are not alone. We look around and eyes meet and heads nod. We discover we are connected to humanity's sins - and that they must be acknowledged as ours. That is the work of Lent and the path to transformation, to resurrection. Resurrection, transformation, is not something you need a front row seat for. It is not something you see or admire; it is something you feel and uncover; it is something you live. It is the work of Lent and the wonder of Easter.

This year by approaching Easter through the seven last words Jesus spoke from the cross; By preaching each week on one of them, Will and I hope to encourage you, to accompany you, to draw you closer to the cross and the tomb - the true front row seat. From this seat, we desire to prepare you for the dazzling appearance of Christ on the hill at Wright Locke farm as the sun breaks the dark of night and resurrection light takes hold of our hearts.