



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, March 3, 2019

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Exodus 34:29-35 | Psalm 99 | II Corinthians 3:12-4:2 | Luke 9:28-43

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, my strength and my salvation.

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Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, a season devoted to the “showing forth” of God. There are of course many ways in which God can show himself to us. We began Epiphany weeks ago with what might seem to be the most modest epiphany imaginable: God as a little baby born into poverty, in a barn, at night. Today I want to talk about two or three more epiphanies, as they are found in our readings.

In the passage from Exodus, we are told of an epiphany which is at the other end of the spectrum from the manger: God is on the smoking mountain of Sinai, giving law to his people through his servant Moses, whose face glows with an unearthly light whenever he comes down from the mountain. Sinai rumbles and smokes and burns with fires. This is God at his most awesome and powerful and glorious, at the apex of his relation to his people, the moment at which he gave them the law.

Why do you suppose God chooses this time, when his people are wandering in the desert, to give them the law? This is the perhaps most solemn act in the Hebrew Bible, which will define Judaism forever. Why now?

A Rabbi once told me it was no accident. He said the law was given to the people just after their escape from slavery because at this moment they had for the first time attained the free and autonomous state of full human beings. Only now were they capable of receiving, as individuals and as a people, the simultaneous gift and restraint of the law.

For the law is not simply imposed on them by a superior being, but requires their acceptance and commitment. This is a mark of a new stage in the development of humanity, a new and capacious maturity. God is calling upon the people to accept their own full stature as human beings, including the responsibilities that go with it.

Think how differently God approached Adam. He did not give him a code of law, but a single command: not to eat of the tree of knowledge. The command was not a covenant and it did not require Adam's acceptance. It was imposed on him by the powerful one, the Creator of the whole world.

After the great Flood God did make a covenant, in the form of a promise not to destroy all life ever again. But this covenant was completely unilateral. It required no act of acceptance. It was an act of grace and generosity to the whole creation, symbolized in the rainbow. It was not law.

From that point on—up to and including the events with which our passage is concerned—the Bible tells a story that has a simultaneously tragic and comic aspect. We human beings prove to be pretty much impossible, first in one way, then another. It is a bit as though God created us with free will and a moral sense, without quite knowing how fractious and ungrateful and disobedient we would turn out to be.

God seems to ask again and again, What have I done in creating these beings? Yet despite his frustration and anger he never gives up on us. No matter how obnoxious we are, his commitment to us is unconditional.

The passage from Exodus we heard today, about Moses and his glowing face, is part of a longer story in which we demonstrate our obnoxiousness in an extreme way.

First of all, God gives Moses the ten commandments, written by God's finger on the tablets of stone. This is his great covenant, which is accepted by the people and their leaders. Moses then spends forty days on the mountain with God, receiving the rest of the law. But the Israelites—that is, us—think this is taking too long. We melt down our ornaments of gold and make out of them a statue, the Golden Calf, which we worship. In a fury Moses smashes the tablets of the ten commandments.

But God does not give up on us. He gives us the law a second time, on a new pair of tablets. In one sense the new covenant is exactly the same as the original one, for its provisions are the same; but in another it is completely different, for this one is given to us despite our infidelity.

It is an act of God's compassion and forgiveness. In this sense it is an epiphany in itself, a revelation of a God's loving and forgiving nature.

I said that the law is a gift as well as a restraint. How can it be a gift, you may wonder, to be told by the creator of the world “Thou shalt not do this . . . Thou shalt not do that. . . Thou shalt do this other thing. . .?”

The reason is that these commandments are not arbitrary or unloving orders to do things God happens to want. They are all for our benefit, for they are meant to help us create good selves and good relationships—with God and with each other.

The first four of the ten commandments—beginning, “thou shalt have no other gods before me”—are meant to establish a relation of justice and trust between us and the God of the universe, from whom every good thing flows. The remaining six—beginning “honor thy father and thy mother”—are ethical in nature. They are about our treatment of each other, and are meant to help us establish relations of justice and trust with other human beings. The law is indeed a gift.

It is a way of giving meaning and structure to our lives. It is an act of grace. In it God offers us something holy upon which we can build our lives.

There is another dimension to the law. In making this gift, God has found a way to be with his people not just on those occasions when he makes himself known to us, but at all times and places. He speaks to each of us individually—as “thou” or “you”—and does this everywhere and at all times, up to the present moment.

The law is a way of making his epiphany universal, across time and space. It is always there.

To turn now to the Transfiguration, we can see that it is another moment of epiphany, in its own way highly complex. Moses is present, and this reminds us of the glorious God of Sinai—who is here too, speaking in the mighty voice from the cloud. Elijah is here as well, reminding us of a different and equally valid aspect of God, the still small voice he heard on the mountain.

And Jesus is here, transfigured and transformed. He represents still another aspect of God—another way of being God. God can be glorious, as he is with Moses, or quiet and small, as he is with Elijah, and now for the first time we see that he can be also human, in the form of Jesus, claimed by the voice from the cloud as his son—human, yet still full of divine glory.

We are not given the law here. That is not what God is doing. He is making us a gift, but not the gift of meaning and responsibility that is the law; rather, it is the gift of his presence, in the form of his Son, who will live with us as one of us.

In the remainder of his life Jesus will show us—not just tell us—how God wants us to live, out of love and trust. This is the creation of a new humanity. It is the amazing fact of the Christian story and its own epiphany.

What happens just after the Transfiguration? Jesus is met by a father pleading that his only son be healed from his dreadful illness, which no one else has been able to cure. How does

Jesus respond? By healing the boy.

This is I think an image of his whole life with us. He gives us not the law, but himself, in healing.

What strikes me most about this scene is how desperate and distraught the father is—as each of us would surely be in such circumstances. This is what we know human suffering can be like: total, hope-destroying, undoing the very self in fear. For the father I think there was no one in the world but his son and himself in their mutual suffering.

When Jesus responds to the father he is recognizing that fact in the father and honoring it. In the moment in which he is healing the father and the son, I imagine that their suffering is the only reality for Jesus too. If we could wholly enter someone else’s world in compassion, it would become the whole world for us as well.

We know that we cannot really do that. We cannot imagine others fully, even with our best friends and family. We know theoretically that every person is unique and uniquely valuable, and that their suffering is as important as our own. But we cannot know it practically.

But Jesus can. He always reaches out and responds to our deepest nature. For to Jesus humanity is not a people, nor a species, but a series or collection of unique persons, unique souls, each of whom is of infinite importance, each of whom needs to be healed, as this boy and his father are healed.

But how can he do this? Jesus cannot heal the whole world, one person at a time—or at least not when he is working as a human actor, bound by space and time, as he is in our story and throughout the Gospels.

But in another way that is exactly what he does. He offers us, even today, the presence in the form of his Resurrected self: his presence in the Eucharist, in the church, and in our own hearts and minds. He dwells within us, within each of us, and is offering to heal us all, one at a time, in our actual lives, here and now, tomorrow and yesterday, whenever we can respond to him. This is a new and amazing form of epiphany, an epiphany in our own hearts.

As the law renders the God of Sinai truly universal, so Jesus’ Resurrection renders him universal. Two amazing epiphanies, two valid religions, two ways in which God is with us now. Emmanuel indeed!

How are we to respond to Jesus? Not by building tents, like Peter, but by recognizing and responding to the healing presence of Jesus in each of our lives, in the lives of every person we meet. For Jesus is present in our hearts. This is the ultimate epiphany, an epiphany within us.

Our task is to tune our hearts so that we can hear and know him. Perhaps that could be our Lenten task this year. AMEN