



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, August 6, 2017

The Feast of the Transfiguration

ROBERT WESTVEER

Exodus 34:29-35 | Psalm 99:5-9 | II Peter 1:13-21 | Luke 9:28-36

“Who are you?” That is one of the most fundamental questions we face. It demands an answer, a response, an explanation, maybe even a defense. This the question we ask when we hold a newborn child in our arms. “Who are you?” What sort of personality will you show, what gifts will you develop, how will you choose to live your life? This is the question that the members of the Rite Thirteen class and the Young Adults in the Church ask themselves. This is the question we ask ourselves over and over again. When we come across people who have answered that question, they often look radiant, a little shy or self-conscious and filled with the quiet awe of self-discovery.

This is the question that people asked of Jesus. This is the question he asked and answered himself. When people saw Jesus—in the Temple at age twelve, after his baptism or when he first preached in his own home town, he too often looked radiant, a little shy or self-conscious, filled with the quiet awe of self-discovery. Jesus began his ministry armed with the self-discovery of his mission to seek out the lost, the marginalized and the forgotten so he could proclaim the year of the Lord's favor to them. What better way to reach out to those he wanted to help than to join them in the waters of baptism.

When he came up out of the waters, he heard God's affirmation in his mind, heart and soul: “You are my son, my chosen one, my beloved, the one on whom my favor rests.” But after that “mountain-top” experience, God sent Jesus into the desert to see if he had the patience, perseverance and desire to survive a time of testing where he found only silence, emptiness, loneliness and the seductive temptations of short-cuts. Jesus focused on the words of the prophet: “Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart.”

That brings us to the Gospel text before us. Jesus asks his followers: “Who do people say that I am?” In further search of self-discovery, he took three of his closest disciples up a mountain to pray. While praying, the affirmation from God caused his face to shine and his clothes to become radiant. He was enveloped in the numinous cloud of God's glory. He heard God telling him: “You are my son, my chosen one, my beloved on whom my favor rests.” However tempting it would be to stop here, the story will not let us.

For the text tells us Moses and Elijah joined Jesus and talked with him. Traditionally, Moses and Elijah are seen as examples of the Law and Prophets. But I think there is a deeper and more troubling reason for their appearance here. Perhaps Moses ruefully reminded Jesus of what happened to him when he came down Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the Law. His face too was shining and his mind was also filled with a “mountain-top” experience of the glorious affirmation of God's presence. But then he saw how the people had forgotten God, built a calf of gold and were now worshipping it. In his anger and disgust, Moses shattered the tablets and excoriated the people. This, Moses might have said to Jesus, is what you will face as well. And Jesus might have replied: “I know. Keep silent.”

Then Elijah would have recounted his battle with the priests of Baal, who were supported by Queen Jezebel. The battle ended with Elijah's complete rout and destruction of the priests. Another “mountain-top” experience. But no sooner had this “mountain-top” experience unfolded, than Elijah was running for his life to escape the death threats of Queen Jezebel. He was deflated, discouraged, despondent. This, Elijah might have said to Jesus, is what you will face as well. And Jesus might have replied: “I know. Keep silent.” Again, Jesus focused on the words of the prophet: “Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, be strong, take heart.”

The word of the Lord comes to us today. God says to us, as God said to Jesus, “You are my beloved, my chosen, the ones on whom my favor rests.” Is this not how it all began? God created humankind, in the image of God, God created them, male and female God created them. And God saw that this was good. Were these words not also pronounced over us at the time of our baptism? “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as God's own forever.” This is the answer to the question: “Who are you?” We are people who have learned hope and expectation from “mountain-top” experiences. “Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.” But we have also learned patience and perseverance from “valley of darkness” experiences. “Wait for the Lord, be strong take heart.” We cannot have one without the other.

We don't know anything about who wrote the Epistles of Peter. Nor do we know anything about the faith community there. But at some point, the members of that community must have come to the Epistle writer and asked: "Who are we?" And, in our epistle reading he told them they were people of faith founded on the transfiguration experience. He told them: "We were not following a cleverly written-up story when we told you about the power and coming of the Lord Jesus Christ—we actually saw his majesty with our own eyes. . . . We actually heard the voice speaking from heaven while we were with him on the mountain. The word of prophecy was fulfilled in our hearing! You should give that word your closest attention, for it shines like a lamp amidst all the dirt and darkness of the world until the day dawns, and the morning star rises in your hearts." (Philips translation).

This is what we should to say to those who ask "who are we?" when they are just starting out in the journey of self-discovery that we call life and who wonder how it will all play out. This is what we should say to those who ask "who are we?" when they are in the middle of that journey of self-discovery but who may feel their labors are not productive. This is what we should say to those who as "who are we?" when they are nearing the end of that journey but who may feel they can no longer be givers but only takers. Tell them: "Wait for the Lord, whose day is near; wait for the Lord, be strong take heart."

Amen.