

WELCOME TO THE MOUNTAIN. NOW GO HOME.

Sermon, March 6, 2011

Transfiguration Sunday

Texts: Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9, II Peter 1:16-21

On Sunday of Labor Day weekend this past September, I left worship, dashed home with my family, fed them, walked the dog, fed the cats, grabbed my bag, zoomed to TF Green Airport, parked in Garage C, ran to the main entrance and up the escalator stairs to security, and boarded a USAir flight to Philadelphia just minutes before they shut the door to the gate. Arriving in Philadelphia, I rented a car and raced down I-95 south to Wilmington, DE and arrived at the downtown Marriott hotel about one half hour before the start of my nephew's wedding. It was a beautiful ceremony, and afterward I was so thoroughly enjoying my time at the reception with family and acquaintances, excellent food, a great band and some fun dancing that I almost lost track of time. I looked at my watch, jumped to my feet, said all my goodbyes, kissed my mother and sisters and sisters-in-law and cousins and my new niece-in-law and dashed down to the parking garage to my rental car, zoomed back up I-95 N to Philadelphia International Airport in order to catch my 10:45 PM flight home (*part of life as a single parent is not being away any longer than absolutely necessary*). I was running late, asking the Lord's forgiveness along the way for exceeding the lawful limit on the road. I arrived at the Hertz rental about 10:10, quickly checked it in, and not wanting to wait for the shuttle bus, I sprinted across the parking garages and access roads because I knew the airport well, heading for Terminal B. I wasn't overly concerned ...yet.

However, when I ran up the Terminal B escalator to the security checkpoint, I was horrified to find the checkpoint was closed and nobody was around except for one lone security guard on patrol ... who informed me the security points in Terminals A, B, C and D were all closed for the evening, and I would have to go all the way down to the security checkpoint at Terminal E! This is a BIG airport. And remember, the flight was scheduled to depart 10:45; it was now around 10:20. I ran all the way down this cavernous, empty hallway lined with closed stores past Terminal C, past Terminal D and finally arrived at the TSA checkpoint of Terminal E huffing and puffing ... and I was the only passenger there, with six TSA agents all hanging about. I'm frantically kicking off my shoes, yanking off my belt, emptying my pockets and throwing everything into those gray bins, when I hear the call over the intercom, "*Dr. Stephen Clark, Dr. Stephen Clark, if you are in the airport terminal, please report to Gate 39 Terminal B right away.*" I'm tugging off my belt and pleadingly bellowed to the six agents, "*That's me. I'm Dr. Clark! They're paging me! Where is the intercom phone so I can return the page?*" Well, they all shrugged their shoulders ... "*We don't work for the airport. We don't know.*" Meanwhile, they're all wearing walkie-talkie radios, but not wanting to perturb them and potentially cause delay to my processing, I just buttoned my lip and submitted to the drill. They were kind enough to hurry me through the screening, and off I went running back down the cavernous hall past Terminals D and C, never bothering to put my belt or shoes back on. I'm tired, it's been a very long day, my knee still aches from the injury I got last August running in the Blessing of the Fleet race, my feet hurt, I'm lugging my carry-on, my pants are slipping down (*I'm carrying the belt*) I'm huffing and puffing and worrying that at my age I may be a prime candidate for cardiac arrest, and I arrive at Terminal B only to find from the female security agent there that gate 39 is all the way down the hallway, turn right, and all the way at the end of THAT hallway! I told her, "*I was paged, I'm Dr. Clark, please let them know I'm coming!*" I make it down to the end of the first hallway, turn right, and coming the other direction is a burly man in a white shirt with a USAir logo walking in my direction, who says to me, "*Rev. Clark?*" I responded, "*YES! That's me.*" With a Texas drawl, he said "*Take your time, sir, you're OK, the plane won't leave without you.*" I assumed he was a steward or some USAir ticket agent; the man was confident, calming, assuring, and absolutely sure the plane wouldn't leave. In fact, he was positively certain the plane would not leave and that I would make it home to Providence ... because, as I learned, this man was the plane's CAPTAIN! He told me he saw my name and title on the manifest (*I had checked in on line*), and in his devotional time that morning, he was reading in Proverbs, where it says, "*And thou shall never take off without the Reverend on board.*" I don't know what translation of the Bible he was reading, but I didn't care ... all I knew was I was going to make it home, because the *pilot* was walking with me!

It may be stretching the analogy a bit, but in our Gospel account of the Transfiguration, our lesson today, Peter, James and John are shown the Pilot of their souls as He really is. Whatever transpires along the way in the difficult weeks ahead on the journey to Jerusalem, this scene today should convince them the Pilot of their souls will be walking with them no matter what, and He will eventually take them Home.

Peter writes of this in our Epistle reading today. "*We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."* -- II Peter 1:16ff We are eyewitnesses of the majesty of Jesus Christ, he writes, specifically referring to the event recorded in our Gospel reading. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' face "shone like the sun," His clothes "became as white as the light," (*which is reminiscent of Psalm 104:2, when the Psalmist describes God as one Who "... wraps Himself in light as with a garment."*) and Moses and Elijah appeared with Him, and we are told in Luke's account they were talking about what will be happening in the days ahead. And then a cloud enveloped the disciples, and God's voice sounded from the cloud and said, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*" Peter reiterates emphatically, "*We ourselves heard this*

voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain." Peter writes this letter knowing that his time on earth was short and that his readers were facing many dark difficulties and dangers in the persecution to come. In the midst of whatever may come, Peter reminds them, our faith in Jesus Christ is not grounded on myths or clever stories; it's *real!* It is based on the sure revelation from God. And he refers specifically to this scene from the Gospels, the transfiguration, which seems to have been a defining moment for these disciples. I'm sure the vivid memory of this experience kept them going through some very dark times. In this moment on the Mount, Jesus confirmed Peter's confession made eight days earlier, thus erasing all remaining doubt as to who He might be. He also confirmed He would have to go by way of the Cross, by way of betrayal and rejection and suffering and death, but on the other side of all this he would be raised in eternal life and glory. Yes, He was going suffer; but Yes, all would be well.

I think Jesus took Peter and James and John up onto the mountain with him because He wanted to give them something to remember and to hold onto when times got tough. On that mountain they are given a glimpse into how it will all turn out. He wanted to assure them He knew what He was doing. Moses and Elijah are there to confirm it. By being given this intense experience, this glorious glimpse into the Kingdom of God, they can now see that no matter what they may have to endure, the story will turn out well.

Glorious as the transfiguration experience was, I think it's significant to note that God didn't speak at all during it. When did He speak? He spoke afterwards. He spoke from the cloud which followed the experience, the cloud which enveloped and overshadowed the amazed, confused, dazed disciples. Clouds so often follow life's wonderful and glorious moments, don't they? Sometimes they are dark, difficult, even stormy clouds. So often after the "highs" come the realities and fears and doubts of the "lows." And sometimes the clouded lows seem to go on forever. But it was in the *cloud* the disciples discovered God. It was in the cloud the disciples heard the voice of God. It was while they were covered in cloud, disorientated, confused, frightened, that God spoke to them and told them to *trust in Jesus*. If that's the case, then with apologies to Judy Collins, I say send in the clouds! For that is where God is encountered. That is where genuine faith takes root. That is where the intensity of previous religious experience takes on real meaning. The clouds are times for listening to God and experiencing His presence and learning to trust Jesus.

You know, when Peter experienced the Transfiguration he wanted to set up dwellings and stay there. It seems he just wanted to dwell in perpetual spiritual clarity. But he could not do so. Jesus wouldn't let him. He had to go back down the mountain. They all had to go back down the mountain, back to the valleys and plains of work. But they descended with a quiet knowledge and confidence in their hearts that the Hope is real. They descended with a quiet knowledge and confidence that they had been given a very special gift ... a glimpse into the Kingdom of God, a glimpse at the end-result of God's salvation. Spiritual experiences can and do come to us. Many, if not all of us, have experienced defining moments when we sense the very presence of God, when we "see" the glory of God. Wonderful and joyful as these moments are, they do not last, do they? We'd love to hang onto them, we'd love to dwell in that perpetual spiritual clarity, but Jesus won't let us, either. The transience of these moments is not always our fault. The fleeting nature of the highs of joyful experience are not some kind of sign of lack of faith. It is the pattern of Transfiguration: a glimpse of glory followed by a return to the often cloudy paths of discipleship. God gives us a glorious taste of what will be; then God says, "Welcome to the mountain. Enjoy it. Now go home. Get back to work." And when difficult things happen, when the clouds form, we need to remember those vivid experiences of the reality of God in our lives, and we need to listen for God's voice within the clouds that follow. For it is in the cloud that we really encounter God. Even for Jesus, the transfiguration was transient. It was after His death and resurrection that He was glorified forever. And it's the same for us. Our difficulties and transformations in this life will always be transient, but the ending will be utterly glorious.

May a year ago I was in San Diego for the wedding of David and Sojin Lim's daughter, Marion. There was a bumper sticker on a car there in San Diego that read: "*Welcome to San Diego. Now go home.*" This not so subtle hint by this resident of San Diego was "*Welcome. Enjoy our sights and sounds, even leave some of your money here, but don't stay here. It's already too crowded.*" In a way, that's one of the subtle messages of this Gospel passage. "Enjoy the Mountain. Now go home." There are two dimensions to the Christian life: the mountain of exultation and the valley of service. The mountain where we encounter God, where we feel our souls refreshed, where we find a new motivation for the living of our lives. And the valley where we maintain our responsibilities where we reach out to those who are hurting where we seek to be the body of Christ at work today. In fact, the only kind of mountaintop experience worth having is one that leads us down from the mountain of exultation on into the valley of service. Any other type of mountaintop experience is bogus.

I always hope you receive a blessing from our worship service. I always hope the music and the prayers and the fellowship bring you closer to God than you have ever been before. But no offense, I don't want you to stay here. There are people outside these walls who need your love and your witness of faith and your encouragement; they need to know the vision of Christ you hopefully have experienced here. They may live next door. They may work in the office with you. You may pass them on the street going home. But after each benediction you are sent to follow Jesus Christ into the valley of service, you are sent down there to be a blessing to others while walking with your Pilot.

Welcome to the mountain. Now go home.