

TO CONVERT HEARTS, NOT RAVISH THE SENSES

Sermon for Epiphany Last – Mt 17:1-9

LPC, 2/26/17

Have you ever wished that God would speak to you clearly the way God speaks to many people in the Bible, overwhelming your senses and making God's will completely clear? How well I remember a young woman who was touring my seminary campus at the same time I did. She was retiring from the Army and was trying to discern whether or not she had a vocation to go to seminary. "If only God would just tell me what he wants me to do," she cried in anguish.

People in the Bible don't seem to have this problem. God speaks, and the person listening knows it's God. Sometimes the person refuses to obey God at first, like Jonah, or protests that he or she is not qualified to speak for God, like Moses or Jeremiah. But there never seems to be doubt about who is speaking or what is being said when God speaks in the Bible. Heavens! Paul got knocked clean off his horse!

Today, with the story of the Transfiguration of Christ, we have another example of God speaking and the message being unmistakable, both in terms of who is speaking and of what is being said. Once again Jesus of Nazareth is shown to be the Son of God through direct revelation from heaven.

Remember that this is the ongoing theme of Gospel lessons in this Epiphany Season: Jesus being revealed as the Son of God. We have seen Jesus shown to be the Son of God through direct revelation from heaven twice before: when God spoke to the Wise Men from the East through the stars directing them to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, and at Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, where the heavens open, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice from heaven says, "This is my Son."

We have also seen, this Epiphany season, that Jesus is revealed to be the Son of God through the testimony and actions of third parties like the disciples. We have seen Jesus revealed to be the Son of God in discipleship itself: in the actual process of following Jesus. And we have seen Jesus revealed to be the Son of God through Jesus' own teaching, specifically the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, in the Transfiguration we are back to direct revelation from God. This time there is a striking visual element as well as the voice from heaven... a real sound and light show. Jesus' face "shines like the sun" the way Moses' face used to do when Moses communed with God long ago. Jesus' clothes become irradiated with blinding light.

Then Jesus is joined by the supernatural figures of Moses and Elijah, who converse with Jesus. These figures are supernatural because they have been long gone from this earth and are presumed to be with God in heaven. Moses represents the law, and Elijah represents the prophets. Thus both elements of Jewish history that represent God's presence and God's covenant with God's people are seen to be in conversation with Jesus. At the same time they are

both ultimately deferential to him, since they both eventually disappear leaving Jesus alone. This is indeed significant. The authorities previously known to be the highest reference points for God's will for God's people – the law and the prophets – are seen to be in conversation with Jesus, but also subordinate to him. They literally fade before him.

But before that, we get the voice from heaven, repeating the words we heard once before when Jesus was baptized by John in the River Jordan: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” If you missed at the Jordan, there is no mistaking God's message now. Jesus is God's Son, and has God's authority. Furthermore, Jesus is the revealer of God's true glory: an even truer revelation of God's glory than the Law and the prophets.

Then the spoiler. Jesus tells the disciples who have witnessed this celestial display, this earth-changing phenomenon: “Don't tell anybody.” What???

If the disciples had been permitted to share what they had seen, would that not have won Jesus converts? Especially in a more credulous age, would not Jesus have been recognized as the Son of God by anyone hearing this glamorous story? It's not hard to imagine that, followed by crowds who knew of God's personal testimony surrounding this particular man, that Jesus might never have been crucified! Many of those people who eventually clamored for Jesus' death might have been persuaded otherwise if they knew about the Transfiguration!

Because Jesus himself prevented this from happening, we must assume that this is not what Jesus intended or wanted. Jesus must not have wanted to overwhelm people with heavenly displays of power. Jesus must have been seeking a conversion of hearts rather than a ravishment of the senses.

Notice that Jesus does not tell the disciples never to tell of what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus tells them not to tell until “the Son of Man has risen from the dead.” Here we have as full a proof as we are going to get that Jesus intends to submit to death rather than claim sovereignty on the basis of heavenly power.

To us humans this naturally seems like a rather odd way to go about winning friends and influencing people. After all these years of churchgoing and prayer and seminary and study I am not sure I yet understand it. But from the story of Jesus it is plain that Jesus' intention is to convert hearts by entering into their pain and vulnerability rather than to ravish minds by overwhelming the senses. We might prefer it to be otherwise. It might be easier for us if God just swept us up right now and spoke to us in an unmistakable Darth Vader voice. But that's not often God's way.

God reveals God's glory not in the boffo sound-and-light displays our senses crave, but in the love that is willing to accompany human beings into the darkest places of our souls. God's glory is revealed more truly in the Cross than on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah. Thus we transition this week from Epiphany, the story of how God is shown to be the Son of God, into Lent, which shows that the way of the Son of Jesus is the way of the Cross.