

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, February 22, 2009.

Last Epiphany Year B

The apostle Peter started out as a fisherman. He was apparently a man of faith. And Peter must have liked an adventure. Because one day when a Rabbi named Jesus came along and said, "Follow me," Peter jumped at the chance to leave his fishing nets and do something different. Here was an opportunity to live his faith and live on the edge. And the more he got to know Jesus, the more he felt like he was a part of something really important. Jesus was healing people and casting out demons. Jesus was not just an ordinary Rabbi. Jesus was really close to God, like a prophet, but unlike any prophet that had ever been. And Jesus notices Peter, makes him one of the leaders of his inner circle. Peter gets very excited, because he figures out that Jesus is the One, the anointed One of God they've been waiting for, the messiah. But then Jesus starts talking about how he'll have to suffer and die. Peter does not like that kind of talk. Suffering and death do not fit in the picture of how things ought to go for a messiah. He and Jesus have a little argument about that, but then six days later things seem better. Jesus takes Peter along with two of the other leaders, James and John, up a high mountain by themselves for a little "leadership summit." Peter was probably excited, because in spite of their argument, he was getting some special treatment by the teacher. Things are good for Peter. He had been a mere fisherman. Now he's a leading disciple of the mighty healer and preacher who has been sent by God to save the chosen people of Israel. All in all, Peter has a good story to tell about his life.

We all have stories that we tell about our lives. Where we come from, what we do, what experiences we've had, what gives our life meaning. At some points the story is positive. At other points, it may be less rosy. Our culture, our society, tells stories as well. These days we hear a lot of stories about the difficult times we live in. Challenging times, tough times. Times unlike anything we have ever seen. Uncertain times. Some of us have lost jobs and homes. Others are wondering if we will be next. Even if we have not been touched significantly by the financial upheavals, we are still a part of the larger story, and it affects how we see the world. Stories have power. Today's Gospel lesson is itself a story, and it reveals that God can break without warning into our narrative and take us to a whole new chapter.

Like I was saying, Peter must be feeling good as he heads up the mountain with Jesus. But then, without warning, Peter's story is interrupted. The scripture says Jesus is transfigured before them and his clothes become dazzling white. And the ancient prophets Elijah and Moses appear, talking with Jesus. One moment, Peter and James and John are standing on the mountain with Jesus. The next moment, they might as well be in another time, in another dimension. Peter, not really knowing what to say...starts talking. Maybe he's trying to make this episode work into his story. Maybe he's thinking about being top disciple and about how he's working for the most amazing healer prophet messiah in the world. And so he interrupts the conversation between Moses and Elijah and Jesus to say, "Rabbi, it's good for us to be here." Kind of like saying, "Hey, teacher, this is really really cool." Then he goes on, "Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." In other words, he's saying, "This is so cool, I don't want to lose this moment." If he had had a camera, I'm sure he would have said, "Hold still and let me get a picture. Let me build a little box for you guys, and it will be the most amazing thing ever." Peter wants to enshrine the moment. He wants to control it and make it precious. He

wants to make it fit into his story, his way of telling what is going on. In today's slang we might say that Peter was 'freaking out.' The transfigured Jesus is so outside his frame of reference, so beyond his ability to comprehend what is happening, that he is just blabbering, trying and failing to say something that will make sense.

At that moment, a cloud overshadows them and a voice comes from the cloud. "This is my son, the Beloved...listen to him!" In other words, "Put away your camera, Peter. Quit trying to make this into a precious moment. Quit trying to fit this into your story and listen up." The transfiguration is about God breaking into the story and changing everything. The transfiguration is a preview of what will happen in the resurrection, a revelation of how God will show God's glory. "Listen to my son" says the voice, because he is about to tell you a new story.

Like Peter, most of us have a tendency to cling to our story. We spend a lot of mental and spiritual energy trying to make reality fit into the box we have created for it. Even when we encounter hardship and struggle, things we had not counted on, we try to make them fit into a box, so that we can understand them in some larger context, some broader narrative that gives them meaning. This works for us a lot of the time. But sometimes God wants to show us something new. Sometimes, God wants to interrupt the plot, turn the page, and alter what we think will be the ending. That's what transfiguration and resurrection are all about, changing the story and revealing God's glory.

Have you ever had a transfiguration moment, a time when everything changed without warning and you felt the transforming presence of God? When did the divine reality break into your ordinary reality and alter it forever? There does not have to be a shining light or visions of prophets for a transfiguration moment to occur. God breaks into our lives and changes things in all kinds of ways. It might happen on a mountain top. Or it might happen in the line at the grocery store. I do not think, though, that it is any accident that many such moments occur in the midst of struggle, in the midst of labor, in the midst of difficulty. When we are breaking down, God has a way of breaking through.

We keep hearing the story that everything is breaking down these days. We keep hearing the voices telling us that we live in the most difficult times in several generations. That story may be true, but the voice we need to hear is the voice of God speaking in the cloud of confusion, reminding us, "This is my son, the beloved, listen to him!" Listen to him. Stop telling your version of the story for a moment so that he can tell you a new story. Stop freaking out and looking for a shelter to build and just listen. Yes, these are difficult times, but these are also times when we might be most ready for a transfiguration, for a revelation of the glory of God, for an inbreaking of what we sometimes call "the fullness of time." These are difficult times, but there is a time beyond time, God's time. And in that time, there is a story which has been told from the beginning of creation. It's a story that includes prophets, sages, and saints, most of whom were pretty ordinary until God messed with their lives. And now may be a time when we are given a part of that story to tell. Now may be a time when God is going to mess with our lives. Now may be a time for transfiguration. But we won't know it unless we listen.

Listen to my son, says the voice from the cloud. Listen to him, because his story has amazing power to heal and to transform. Listen to him, because the story he tells will set you free. Listen to him, because his story is better than anything you can come up with. Stop talking and listen! Turn off the news for a minute and listen. Put down your agenda for a day and listen. Seven weeks from now we will celebrate the most amazing surprise ending, the most amazing surprise

beginning of any story ever told. Easter Sunday and the resurrection remind us of God's glory and love and mystery. In these seven weeks, listen carefully. Turn down the volume on the story tellers who want to tell the same old tales of woe and worry. Turn down the volume on the ones who want to put a fence around wonder, who want to enclose mystery, who want to make Jesus into something precious and controllable. In these seven weeks, listen to the voice of a messiah who is messing with our lives, who invites us to be transfigured with him. In the next seven weeks, walk with Christ into the wilderness, walk with Christ to Jerusalem. Walk with Christ to the cross...and beyond. We will not escape the difficult stories of our day. We may hear our part in the glorious story of God's justice, God's passion, and God's mercy.