

March 2, 2014 / Transfiguration of Jesus / David L. Edwards

Jesus' Transfiguration and Ours

2 Peter 1:16-21

You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Matthew 17:1-9

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

The Lenten season begins this week with Ash Wednesday. The readings from Matthew and Second Peter invite us to enter Lent with a renewed practice of the inward journey. When we make time each day to be inwardly quiet, we grow in awareness of our lives in relation to God. These days our society and world are awash in violence, injustice, and the distraction of many superficialities. The most radical thing we can do is to go back to silence and inner listening. It is the gateway to our true humanity. Lent is more important than ever as a season of renewed spiritual practice, not in order to be religious, but to be the unique, precious, and loving human beings God created us to be.

In the gospel story, Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain. Jesus' appearance is transformed--face shining like the sun, clothes dazzling white. These are images of a life close to God, transparent to God's presence, and purposes. Moses and Elijah appear, and talk with Jesus. They represent the law and the prophets of Israel. Their presence confirms Jesus' importance.

Peter feels compelled to talk: "Jesus, it is good to be here. Let's build three booths for you, Elijah and Moses." Peter can't keep quiet, and he wants to make the experience permanent. It is so often hard for us to remain silent when we experience something of the sacred dimension of life. We are uneasy with silence and feel compelled to spatter sacred moments with words. In fact, it may be our compulsive talking, either aloud or in our minds, that prevents us from experiencing the sacredness that is always all around us. Cultivating the ability to be silent, inwardly and outwardly, enables us to be receptive to sacredness and revelation.

Peter's impulse to "capture the moment" by building the booths is also familiar behavior. We want to preserve special experiences, make them last. Nothing about life is permanent. Attempts to nail down and hang onto experiences always fail. We get stuck in the past, or try to repeat the past in the present. The life of faith is not about enshrining spiritual experiences, or even seeking them. It is about being awake and aware of God's presence and movements in the here and now. Our community uses the word journey to describe the life of faith. If we take that seriously, it means learning how to be present and aware in each moment, each day, not clinging to the past or imposing past experiences on the present. It means letting go so that we can be open to God's continuing presence and movements in and among us.

Suddenly, a cloud envelopes them all. Out of the cloud comes a voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" This is the center of the story, the divine confirmation of Jesus as one whose life is fully open to God and to whom we need to listen. This is the whole reason for the special effects--the mountaintop, the radiant clothes, the cloud, all of it. Listen to him! That has been the problem. The disciples have not been listening to Jesus. They hear what he is saying, but it does not sink in. It does not take root in their lives. They are too full of their own ideas of who he is or who they think he should be. They have not really been paying attention.

God does not call us to be full of ideas or talk, but to listen. Listening is the foundation of the life of faith. The word "obedience" has its root in "to listen". First listening, then doing. Doing is shaped by listening. The outward is shaped by the inward. Obedience is not about a bunch of doing, about activism. It is not about rote compliance with laws, religious or otherwise. Obedience as spiritual practice means that we first of all listen. Then we do what we hear, what we authentically feel called or led to do.

Elijah, Moses, and the cloud disappear. The disciples are cringing in fear. Characteristically, Jesus comes over to them, lifts them up, and tells them not to be afraid. Jesus is always telling us not to be afraid. Fear is the number one obstacle to free, faithful, and joyful living. Jesus wants us to follow him in care-free trust. As they walk back down the mountain, Jesus tells the disciples to say nothing about what they have seen. This is odd. When we have a profound spiritual experience, we want to tell everyone. You know, get all excited, tell everyone about Jesus! Christianity has been a very talkative religion, filled with words. We

confuse being a religion of the living Word of God with being a wordy religion. Here at the beginning of Lent, we have Jesus' call to silence, even about him. Jesus says to keep quiet about it until the "son of man is raised from the dead." We can easily get it wrong without seeing the whole story, the rest of Jesus' teachings and ministry. His suffering. His giving up of power. His death at the hands of those seeking power. The surprising mystery of his resurrection, that his life is not snuffed out by those lost in political and religious power and control. When Christians are not listening to but talking a lot about Jesus, they get caught up in things that have nothing to do with Jesus--nationalism, material prosperity, war, the promoting of hate, intolerance, and fear. This is my beloved son; listen to him!

The Tao te Ching, written five centuries before our scriptures, says something with which I think Jesus would agree: *Those who talk do not know, and those who know do not talk*(*Tao te Ching, 56*). It is the same thing here. Knowing--not in your head, but in the core of your being--is more important than talking. Jesus once said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I ask you?(Lk. 6:46)" He was supremely interested in our LIVING as God's people, as those aware of God's kingdom in the midst of life, and living in harmony with it. What we call the inward journey is the daily practice of the kind of silence and awareness that opens up in us such knowledge, insight, and living.

It is at this point I was struck by the reading from The Second Letter of Peter. The writer refers to the transfiguration event. We were there, he says. We heard the voice. This confirms what the writer sees as the absolute importance of looking to Jesus, listening to Jesus. That is the prophetic message the writer is talking about. "Prophetic" means a message, a truth from God. Peter is saying that the most important message for us is the importance of Jesus, who he is and what he has to teach us as one who is so close to God, whose life is so transparent to God. As we look to him, listen to him, we find the same light in ourselves.

Then comes this marvelous sentence: *You will do well to be attentive to this [message about Jesus] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts*. I don't know exactly what the writer originally meant by this beautiful sentence, but to me it is a wonderful image of contemplative living, living that is grounded in listening to Jesus, and through Jesus, God. It is what we literally do when we sit in a place we have chosen for our daily inward journey time. We may light a candle, a reminder of God's presence. We do this, too, on Sundays when we gather here in silence, with a candle burning

before us, in our presence. We sit long enough to let our minds and hearts settle down, become quieter. Then we can begin to listen, becoming attentive to and aware of what is going on around us as well as inside us. In this way, we are becoming present and receptive to God's voice and call in our lives. The day dawns, and the morning star of our life in God rises in our hearts.

The writer is saying, "Pay attention to this message about Jesus, just as you would look at a lamp shining in a darkened room. Keep contemplating this light, this message, this life until the day dawns and the morning star that heralds the new day rises in your own hearts." The writer does not say that the day MIGHT dawn and the morning star MIGHT rise in your hearts. He says UNTIL the day dawns for you and the morning star rises in your heart. These are such encouraging words to us about our spiritual practice! As dark as the room may be, as faint as the lamp may shine, the light will dawn in us. If we keep at it, we will know the reality of our lives in God. This happens as we look to Jesus, as we contemplate with quiet minds and hearts the fullness of his life. Jesus' transfiguration has to do with our transfiguration. The words spoken to Jesus become words spoken to us: "You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased." That, to me, is the morning star rising in our hearts. It is the dawning of our true life as those who are created and loved by God.

These words are a call to the importance of silence and of patience, both of which are difficult for us. We want to get on with the outward, and see the inward only as the launching pad for our actions, for how we have decided things should be. But authentic awareness of our lives in God, awakening or re-awakening to our belovedness, then becoming instruments of what God seeks to do through us, takes a willingness to give ourselves to spiritual practice throughout our lives, each day. We live in a world of forgetfulness, are surrounded by a culture of forgetfulness that distracts us from what really matters and from who we really are. This is why I tend to talk more about the inward journey than the outward, because it is the easiest to avoid and yet it is essential to the outward.

May this season of Lent be a time of renewed inward journey. Let us pay closer attention to Jesus, listening to him, as to a lamp shining in a dark place. As we do so, the day will dawn and the morning star will rise in our hearts. It is the day and the morning star of our authentic, true life.