

SERMON 833

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration)

March 2, 2014

935th Week as Priest

761st Week at St Dunstan's

26th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

TRANSFORMATION

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We are moving from one season of the church into another. We come to the conclusion of the Season of Epiphany, and we enter into the Season of Lent. Everything changes. Colors, music, language, lessons, all of the outward and visible signs of worship are transformed. And they pivot or hinge on this particular day—this Last Sunday after the Epiphany—when we recall the Transfiguration of Christ on the Mountain.

We begin with the story from Exodus of Moses on the holy mountain. He has received the Law from God, the Ten Commandments, and the skin of his face is shining from the glory (shekinah) of God. The people are afraid of his appearance, and it is no small wonder; no person sees God face to face and lives. No one talks directly with YHWH, the Jealous God of the Desert. But he has most certainly spoken with Moses.

We have something to learn from the awestruck people of Israel. We have reason to approach the greatness of the LORD our God with fear and trembling. To come into the presence of God means to be *changed*, and that is not a thing to be taken lightly.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself is changed in the presence of God the Father. As he is praying, again on a holy mountain, his appearance is changed, and his clothing becomes dazzling white. Peter and James and John do not realize what is happening, but they have come into the presence of God, and they are being changed as well.

For his three disciples, Jesus is made known as the Son of God, the Chosen One, but there is more—and there is always more where Jesus of Nazareth is concerned. Jesus is transfigured; that is, he is made known as God the Son—both fully human (which they have known) and fully divine. As is most often the case, the disciples do not comprehend this fullness-of-time moment until a later time. That will come fifty days after his Resurrection in another fullness-of-time known as the Day of Pentecost.

It is this very idea of change—transfiguration, transformation—that I wish we could all consider personally. I know, it's a bit against our nature, as human beings and particularly as Episcopalians who love their tradition. There's an old saying, "We don't want anything to change; we just want it to get better."

But change is the one constant we can count on in God's world and in our own lives. Seasons, weather, birth and death—they are all an integral part of life as we know it. But we are not just observers of change; we are changing within our selves, our souls and bodies. Yes, we mature, we learn and grow, and if we are paying close attention, we see that there are fullness-of-time moments in our lives—opportunities to live in Christ, to minister to others in need, to discover and commit ourselves to some great work or purpose.

You see, the stories of Scripture are never finally written until they are written in the pages of our own lives. The sacred stories apply to you and me as readily as they do in their original context. Transformation by the power of God is a possibility for each of us. Becoming a new creation in Christ is an ever-present opportunity. All we need do is open our hearts and minds to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, and we will find ourselves changing, growing in grace, and becoming more and more the followers of Christ.

This is the essential message of Lent. It is a time of preparation, a season of reflection and of discipline. Forty days of spiritual exercise and healing. This is the wisdom of the Church, that the Season of Lent provides us a window into our souls, a retreat from the chaos and clutter of day-to-day living, and a time to observe the arrival of spring.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote this about spring:

One of the things they say about it, that is true,
is that, once you've been there,
you're there forever.
Listen, everyone has a chance.
Is it spring, is it morning?
Are there trees near you,
and does your own soul need comforting?

I believe that if we listen, and pay close attention, we will find
in the coming of spring, and in the coming of Lent, a soul-comforting
that is essential and quite necessary for us all.

Have you seen the first signs of spring? The jonquils have
arrived—and whether you call them jonquils, or daffodils, or
buttercups, they are here and yellow and alive! The purple vetch
grows on hillsides and creek banks. The red quince and yellow
forsythia are beginning to bloom. And before you know it, we will
see redbuds and dogwoods, azaleas of every Lenten hue, the wisteria,
and the translucent green of the first leaves of trees and the first
growth of grass—and it will be spring and warm and alive! Do you
not see, all around you, that God's glory fills the world with breath
and life? Do you not see the robins and cardinals in your backyard,
feeding on worms and bugs and grubs? The natural world, you see, is
a reflection of the new life promised in Christ, and the changes we
are offered to make in our own lives as the way to welcome that new
life. It is a transfiguration, a transformation—a becoming, blooming,
flowering, digging-in-the-soil, gardening, and growing new life that

we are invited to take part in. “Nothing is so beautiful as Spring,” said the poet, and nothing reminds us quite so much of the intricate and comforting presence of God as this natural world, moving from winter to spring, from Epiphany to Lent, and from old death to new life. “He fathers forth whose beauty is past change. Praise him.”
AMEN.

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