

Transfiguration Sunday (Feb 10, 2013)

Faces Shining

Text: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9: 28-36

When I heard that my aunt had died, and that the funeral would be in Ottawa on a Saturday afternoon, and knowing that my parents in Vancouver really wanted me to go (because they could not), my first thought was: I can do that; and I can drive the 5 hours back Sat night in order to be at church Sunday morning. Then I started to think about it: the time after the funeral, is often the most meaningful part for the family. So I decided to ask for the time away. My request was greeted with absolute support, and I want to say thank you to this congregation, and to David Milmine for so willingly taking over the preaching. Thank you for the gift of being able to squeeze into my cousin's living room in Ottawa with 35 other family members last Saturday evening, to grieve and celebrate together.

It is funny how these things work. I return from that funeral with what I hope will be a gift for you: words about transfiguration.

My aunt had 4 children. 3 of them live in Ontario; the youngest lives in Halifax. He had seen her at Christmas, but didn't get time alone with her, so he decided to come back in January for a few days. On the day he was to fly home to Nova Scotia, he realized this might be the end, so he cancelled his flight and spent Sunday, Jan 20 with her. It turned out to be her last day. She died in her sleep that night.

He wrote about that last day, and it was printed in the bulletin for the funeral service. I would like to read you a little:

"It was my great privilege to have been able to come from Halifax to Ottawa in time to be with my mother in her final days of this life. Her last day, before she slipped quietly in her sleep into the eternal light at 3:05 the following morning, was one I treasure above all. Bedridden, unable to eat much, though still with appetite enough to playfully complain about the miserable hospital food, *she shone*

I am, by nature, shy of such expressions, but I am forced to tell you that the room was filled with *a sense of the holy . . .* She preferred not to live in the darkly comfortable shadows of the everlasting, but in its exhilarating, challenging and sometimes even daunting light, *such as could be let in from beyond*. It had always been her steady desire to live her life *so as to let that light in . . .* Even as her strength of body and mind was gradually failing as the day went on, *I was sensing this light.*" (italics mine)

Isn't that interesting that in trying to describe his mother, in trying to describe his experience that day, he has to talk about light, and he ends up, almost against his will, with the word "holy." Isn't it interesting the consistency of our human experience: that when people live in the presence of God, or encounter the presence of God, or come into the presence of God, they cannot help but shine. It is not something literal, I suspect; I don't know if a light meter would have registered more lumens in that hospital room, but nevertheless such light is sensed; and becomes visible. This is something entirely beautiful and good, and also mysterious: Light is the effect that God's presence has on us. It has to do with who God is: uncreated light.

We heard in the story of Exodus about Moses' face, when he came down from the mountain, after having been in the presence of God: his face shone. God is invisible, God is Spirit, but nevertheless the encounter is one that affects Moses' body, that shows in his body, and is evident to those around him: he had seen the Lord. He has seen the Lord in the middle of the wilderness, in a place that seems to many as a place of death. In this place of death, where the Israelites started to complain and ask to go back to Egypt, in this place where they were sometimes thirsty, sometimes hungry, most of the time confused and less than faithful, in this place, light shines because of the presence of God. And you can't help thinking that it is that light, that encounter, that "conversation with the Lord" that keeps Moses alive in a deathly place. Not permanently alive; his body eventually dies, but alive in spirit, willing to continue this risky, uncertain, wild calling of walking through the desert, pushing and pulling and cajoling a stubborn and resistant people as long as he has a body.

There are other stories like this one, of people encountering God, that speak about visions of light: Ezekiel, Daniel, John of Patmos. What is so interesting is that these stories of encountering exquisite light all come in places of death: John of Patmos is in prison; Daniel has been in prison; Ezekiel has his own version of death. And it seems that the purpose of the encounter is to encourage them as they encounter situations of death, because the Light is simply more real. The light is more real.

How else can we explain it? How else can we explain what someone like Isaiah experienced? Isaiah is sent to speak to a people who will look and look, but not see, and listen and listen but will not understand. When Isaiah asks: "How long shall I do this?" and the answer is: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the

midst of the land . . . until there is just a stump.”

How can you explain why God would ask such a thing of Isaiah? What a ridiculous thing to ask: to speak and speak to people who will listen but not hear, look but not see. Why speak? Only if the Light is somehow more real.

What the disciples experience on the mountain top, the shining that transfigures, the voice that speaks, occurs just after Jesus has said he needs to go to Jerusalem to die. Maybe we, like those disciples, don't like that part of the gospel story. I still cringe at those words: “The son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and scribes, and be killed. . . .” The disciples had cringed, and protested: “No! Not that!” Why does Jesus have to die? And why are we called to the same?

And in the wake of that protest, in the wake of the disciples fear and confoundment, they are taken up the mountain and Jesus is transfigured by light. The purpose of Luke's story seems to be to assure all of us, the disciples of his time and the disciples that we try to be, just so there is no mistaking it: this death plan, this going to Jerusalem, this walking towards those who will kill him, this ignominy, this suffering, it is all held in a Light, a holy presence, a beauty, a power that is simply more real.

A story like this is not meant to prove Jesus as “the way” against people who might not be so convinced. A story like this is meant to hold up “the way” of Jesus: into the darkness, because of the Light that is more real.

Here is the glory and mystery of the gospel: we are invited to follow Jesus into the darkness. The light: it is not only for the Son, the chosen one. It is for us too.

All of us, and every living person knows the darkness. We know what it is like to be overwhelmed with fear, to be driven to our knees in utter helplessness and fear and sometimes anger and confusion. Each one of us, if we are honest, knows what it is like to enter the darkness.

The transfiguration is a story of light that shines in the darkness, especially in the darkness, not by might, but like a flame fed by kitchen string and canola oil, in our bodies, frail and bent as they may become, bedridden, fading. The light can yet shine, and transform us and the world. That light “from beyond” wants to be let in, and our bodies, (imagine that!) OUR bodies are the chosen vessels.

In the presence of that light, everything is transfigured. What we thought was important fades. The petty things fade. The important things emerge. We become able to give up what we thought we needed. We see what we truly need.

We are held in uncreated light. May we find it to be true.

May we find ways to trust that it is still true, and know it in our very bodies.

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton Ontario

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