

2019 03 01 – Turbulent Times

Luke 9:28-36

Today's scripture reading begins with the words "About eight days after saying this, Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up onto a mountain to pray." The obvious first question is, "After saying what?" In order to understand today's reading, we need to go back and find out what Jesus said eight days before. Well, as it turns out, Jesus and his disciples had gone off to a secluded place and while they were there Jesus gave his disciples some very bad news. He said to them, "The Chosen One [in other words Jesus] must suffer grievously, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the religious scholars, be put to death, and then be raised up on the third day." Jesus told his disciples that he was going to be tortured and then killed by their own Jewish leaders.

You can imagine how the disciples must have been feeling: the confusion, the grief, the fear, the turmoil that must have been going on their hearts and their minds. This was their rabbi, their teacher, their leader. They had followed Jesus faithfully for three years and now he was telling them, "I am going to die a terrible death." Jesus did say that he would be raised on the third day, but it's doubtful that any one actually heard that part. They would have been too shocked and dismayed by Jesus' devastating news.

We've all had times in our lives when we have been the recipients of difficult news: illness (our own or a loved ones), a tragic accident, the loss of a job, the ending of a relationship, a betrayal, a disappointment. This kind of news can be

life-altering. It can make us feel like we are being tossed around on an angry sea. It can make us feel like we are all alone in the middle of a storm.

I'm sure Jesus recognized that his disciples were in shock, that they didn't know what to say or what to do. This couldn't have been an easy time for Jesus either. What a burden to be carrying: to know that his ministry, his life's calling was probably going to lead to his own death.

So about eight days later Jesus took Peter, James and John and they went up onto a mountain to pray. Jesus took his most trusted disciples, the leaders among his group of followers, and they went on a retreat together. They took time out from their ministry to get closer to God, to connect with the sacred, to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of love. They went seeking support, comfort, guidance, strength and the courage to continue on in spite of the difficulties that they were facing.

In the midst of turbulent times, Jesus decided that they needed to deepen their relationship with the Holy Mystery. Isn't that we all want in our lives? Isn't that why we are here today? Isn't that what being church is all about? We come seeking whatever it is that we need in our lives at this moment. We come seeking the power of God's love, the power of God's compassion, the power of God's grace. We come looking for the support and the healing that we need so that we can continue our ministry of love in God's world.

In today's story, when Jesus was praying, his face changed in appearance and the clothes he wore became dazzling white. Through prayer, through a deeper connection with God, Jesus was changed. He was transfigured, which means he was transformed into a more spiritual state. And with him appeared Moses and Elijah and they talked about what was going to happen to Jesus when he arrived in Jerusalem. They talked about his impending death and resurrection. This conversation was probably just what Jesus needed. It would have provided him with the support and the strength that he required in order to continue his ministry.

Peter and the others had fallen into a deep sleep, but the scripture tells us that they awoke and saw Jesus in this changed state and the two ancient prophets standing with him. They saw Jesus' face glowing and his clothes a dazzling white. It was a brief glimpse of Jesus in his resurrected glory. Some believe that it happened just as the scripture describes and others believe that it was a dream or a vision. Either way this glimpse of glory would have given hope to Jesus' disciples. They now had reason to believe that Jesus' death would lead to new life; that his death would not be the end of his story or of theirs.

I believe that this is a story of hope. It is a story that reminds us to keep looking for glimpses of new life even when things are at their worst. It reminds us the best place to look is in our own soul, that place within each one of us where the holy resides. Parker Palmer describes his glimpse of sacred hope this way. He writes:

Like a wild animal, soul is tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. I learned about these qualities during my bouts with depression. In that deadly darkness, the faculties I had always depended on collapsed. My intellect was useless, my ego was shattered. But from time to time, deep in the thickets of my inner wilderness I could sense the presence of something that knew how to stay alive even when the rest of me wanted to die. That something was my tough and tenacious soul.

Yet, despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye – but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself. (*A Hidden Wholeness, pg 58-59*)

Jesus took Peter, James and John and did exactly as Parker Palmer suggests. When he was in the midst of his own darkness, his own turbulent times, Jesus left the crowds, climbed a mountain and he waited there for God to find him. God came and that connection with the sacred transformed Jesus and his transfiguration became their glimpse of hope.

This is a story of hope because it is also a story of transformation. Sometimes we have to go through difficult times in order to figure what it is that God is calling us to be or to do. This is true for each of us as individuals and even for us as a church. I think that the deficit that we are facing this year is our bad news and that we are now entering into our own turbulent times.

I also believe that we are being called to a deeper relationship with the sacred. We are being called to a time of discernment. A time when we need to let go of our fears, our doubts, our expectations, our pride, and go to that mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James and John. We need to empty ourselves so that The Holy Mystery can fill us anew. We need to open ourselves to whatever may be next on our journey. We need to wait and watch for a glimpse of what the resurrection will look like for us.