

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year C.
March 3, 2019. Luke 9:28-43.

Today is a last deep breath before we take the plunge into Lent, a time when we especially focus on repentance and spiritual growth before Easter. Every year on the final Sunday before Ash Wednesday we read some version of this gospel story—the Transfiguration. It's a difficult story, hard to understand and hard to connect to our lives today. Luke is obviously trying to echo the story about Moses we read from Genesis today, but even that doesn't get us very far in making sense of our lives, faith, and world through the transfiguration. Moses basically got a divine sunburn, or holy radioactivity, from being exposed too long to God. The fact that Jesus was at home in the heart of God isn't a real eye-opener for those of us who have been following this path for some time.

One prominent theory for what is going on in this story is that it is really an Easter, resurrection appearance that got lost and somehow ended up in the middle of the gospels, instead of at the end. Much like how our near neighbor town Hinsdale got up and went for a walk one day, got lost, couldn't find its way back to the wealthy North Shore and just sat down west of La Grange when it got too tired. That theory is a good occasion to make jokes about Hinsdale, but I think that to get what's really going on, we need to take a wider look at what's been going on in Luke and in our worship.

This whole liturgical season that we call the season after Epiphany, the time between Christmas and Ash Wednesday, is about the ways in which Jesus' true identity is revealed. So we start with the wise men visiting the baby Jesus, as a kind of earnest payment for Jesus' eventual revelation to the world beyond Israel. Then we skip forward to Jesus' baptism, when a voice from heaven and the descending Holy Spirit emphasize that this guy is special. Later Jesus stands up in the synagogue and gives his mission statement to bring good news to the poor and to liberate the captives, clarifying what his life on earth is about. And so on. So today is the apex of a series of revelations about who Jesus is. It's been building to this for weeks: this great but mysterious revelation that Jesus, the man from the heart of God, is the Son of God and will be the resurrected one who conquers death.

But there's something strange about our selection of verses. I guess it makes sense to tell us that they went back down the mountain, but why include this story about Jesus losing patience with his faithless disciples and healing the child? It would make more sense to include the story preceding the Transfiguration, in which Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Messiah, Transfiguration, God's Son seems more natural than Transfiguration, God's Son, Irritable Healer. Now, at the peak of this series of stories revealing who Jesus is, we skip Peter's confession that he is the Promised One to make room for the comedown, the frustrating jolt back into real life with problems and needs and people who have plenty of problems but never enough faith.

I'm not sure that the selection here makes the most obvious point, but there's deep wisdom to it. Because Jesus isn't Jesus without caring for the people in need who show up in his path. It isn't the way of the Messiah, the path of the Son of God, if it isn't interrupted by human need. And we aren't following that path unless we, too, allow ourselves to be interrupted by the needs of others.

Two things are interrupted here. Jesus is coming off a considerable religious high—talking with Moses and Elijah, for crying out loud. While it is of course miraculous to us, to Jesus another healing is a mundane crash back to earth. And he has just undertaken a great work. We may have missed it, but his conversation with these biblical heroes is about the salvific work he will do in Jerusalem, the great liberatory achievement of his life. At the end of this chapter, he “sets his face toward Jerusalem” and the whole gospel turns toward the passion. And before he can even get started, he's back to the same old individual salvations he's been engaged in. This healing doesn't fit Jesus' mood and it doesn't make a huge contribution to his overall mission, whose next steps are in Jerusalem. He does it because the need is there.

Now I hope that we can more easily connect this story to our life. Because the church is called to follow along behind Jesus. And this path involves great joys and religious highs and deep peace. It calls us to contemplation and piety. And it involves long-term work, big projects of working to set captives free and proclaim good news to the poor—the kind of work that takes years to bear fruit. This kind of long-range work is constitutive of the church's mission. And, if we are to be the church of Christ, then we must constantly be allowing ourselves to be interrupted, as our Lord was, by the needs right in front of us. Even when we don't much feel like it. Even when we have something more important to do. The person in front of us with need is always inviolably sacred. It is a sacredness that comes from Christ himself, and in meeting it we meet him. Amen.