

Last Epiphany C [1684]
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Florissant, Missouri
February 14, 2010 {1508R}
TEXT: Luke 9:28-36

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Try to imagine how a Hollywood writer might craft a screen play from the gospel stories we have heard these past few weeks. His script would include scenes that show:

how Jesus came to know himself as the Christ of God when his Father's voice affirmed him as his beloved Son after he was baptized;

how his disciples began to believe in him when he changed water into wine at the wedding in Cana;

how he revealed himself to the people of his own hometown as the one whom Isaiah predicted would bring good news to the poor, liberation to the oppressed, and sight to the blind;

how a marvelous catch of fish enticed his disciples to accept their mission to catch people for God; and

how he taught that God's blessings fall on those who were bruised and battered by the world.

For the screenwriter, all of those incidents, and more, would have been leading up to this climactic moment when Peter, James, and John saw Jesus mutated into a celestial being before their very eyes, his face and garments gleaming with a holy light brighter than the Sun. If they had had any doubts about Jesus' divinity, the matter was now settled. God had come to earth in the body of this man, and from now on all people would submit to the authority of one who glowed with a godly light. As the movie shows the disciples enthralled by this magnificent vision, the credits begin to role, signifying that the story of Jesus has come to a glorious and happy end.

But as we all know, real life does not have "Hollywood endings." The mystical moment when Jesus radiated this marvelous, unearthly light was only a twinkle. Once it was over, Jesus headed for Jerusalem and a darkness as deep and depressing as this brief instance was bright and hopeful. As much as we would like his story to end on this note of triumph, we must face, in the days ahead, the gathering gloom of evil that will bring Jesus to the excruciating pain and terrible suffering of the cross. Not until he had gone through that dreadful agony could a final triumph in a resurrected body conclude his earthly story. Those who are looking for a God who won't let bad things happen to good people will be disappointed. They will have to get used to a God who doesn't even spare his own Son the misery this evil world can inflict on its inhabitants.

But why doesn't God intervene to keep bad things from happening to us? If God wants us to love him, don't you think we would love him more if he used his power to eliminate the terrors of

living in this world? Who could resist a glowing God who goes about making all the bad things good and all the wrong things right? Who wouldn't be compelled by his radiant body and his miraculous acts to worship him and love him?

The answer is found in those two words: "irresistible" and "compelling." Is love really love when you can't resist? Is love really love when it is compelled? True love must always be freely given. Try as you might, you cannot *force* someone to love you. God knows this, and he knows that if he became irresistible, compelling love by his intimidating presence, what looks like love would really be fear. Moreover, what love was in it would be selfish, loving God only because we get goodies from him, and love, by definition, is not self seeking.

In fact, true love always requires sacrifice. God never would have revealed the sacrifices he was willing to make to win our hearts if Jesus' career had moved from miracle to miracle and wise teaching to wise teaching until he finally gleamed with an unearthly glow. So he did not stop with that magic moment on the mountain. He came down from the mountain to be lifted on a cross.

If that is so, we have to wonder why this mystical experience on the mountain took place at all. What was God up to there? When you consider what lay ahead for Jesus and for Peter, James, and John, this sublime meeting between Jesus and the two greatest heroes of Hebrew history must have given them enough hope to face the ugly days ahead. When we are in the middle of a painful time, when no light at the end of the tunnel is visible, we need assurance to endure the agony. The memory of this magical moment, which foreshadowed the resurrection of Jesus, gave him and his three disciples the confidence they needed to carry on through the grisly events that were to come.

Lent begins this coming Wednesday. It emphasizes contemplating the evils in the world and in ourselves with which we must struggle every day. Remembering the mystical moments in our own lives when we felt very close to God can give us the hope and strength we need to deal with the pain of lonely self-examination and the despair over evil in the world. Perhaps our moments were not as spectacular as the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Mount of Olives, but as simple or quiet as they might have been, they are the memories that will help us realize that God is never far from us, even when he seems to be absent. Mystical moments like the Transfiguration, or our own private close encounters with God, are never the end of the story. They are the scenes that give us a memory to draw on as we confront the inevitable conflict and suffering that is part of every human story. They are glimpses into the glory of God's coming kingdom, which is where every story ultimately ends.

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