

Sermon

Preacher | The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring

The Gospel | Luke 9:28-36

Date | February 27, 2022



**ALL
SAINTS'**
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Today on this last Sunday of the Epiphany, the season of the manifestation of God in the world, the story of that manifestation reaches its glorious crescendo. Jesus appears on the mountaintop alongside Moses and Elijah and Jesus, each of their appearances changing and their clothes becoming a dazzling white. In the context of the New Testament, the story of the transfiguration is a rather odd tale. Although mentioned in other places, neither Moses nor Elijah make another appearance in the entire New Testament.

It is somewhat understandable then that Peter's first reaction is to state that he will build three dwelling places for them. Why not? In Peter's milieu, glory and power was something that was confined to particular places and particular people. In the Judaic world, the temple in Jerusalem stood as the place on the earth where God's power and glory was to dwell. Likewise, in the world of Rome that dominated Peter's and Jesus's everyday life, the great building projects of Herod the Great in Caesarea Maritima, the winter palace of Jericho and the fortress of Masada, and numerous archways inscribed with the emperor's name, were all vast in scale statements proclaiming that the power and glory of Rome was centralized in one man - the emperor.

Out of context, the story of the transfiguration could so easily look like some sort of cosmic coronation, the confirmation that Jesus' time for power and glory had come. After all, it is in this dazzling appearance that Jesus is declared to be God's Son, the chosen one. Yet this is not a coronation of a savior set above the lowly of the earth, it is the inauguration of a very different sort of power.

In contrast to the imperial rule of Rome, the power of God as we encounter it in the life of Jesus is not centralized but is instead a centrifugal force, a movement of power outward from God. Through his earthly ministry, Jesus doesn't merely dispense divine power, like an alternative peasant-emperor, he shares it, empowering others in his name to radiate that power to others. We see that in the passage that precedes this one in Luke, where Jesus calls the twelve apostles, giving them 'power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases', and sending them out 'to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick' (Luke 9:1-2). The same pattern is repeated throughout the arc of the New Testament. The Way of Jesus is the original user-led movement. And that diffusion of glory and power through the lives of ordinary people has been the revolutionary character of Christianity ever since.

What is clear now, this week written in sharp relief upon the lives of the people of Ukraine, is that we are in desperate need in this world of a revolution of this sort of power. Across the world, when lives are taken with assumed impunity, when a people are denigrated and imprisoned simply because of their ethnic background or their sexuality or their political views, then it is clear that we are in need for a revolution of power. Every time the bigot speaks, every time people rally around the call to diminish another human life in the pursuit of their own gain, we know that it is time for us to take our part in a revolution of power.

Yet it is important for us to recognize that the revolution of power that you and I are inheritors of as followers of Jesus Christ is an expression of power that never seeks to coerce others, never seeks to use power over and against another, but is patterned in the life and action of the One who shows the way to this sort of revolutionary power through the vulnerable self-giving love we see on the cross. For there we see what true power looks like, the power of love giving itself away for others. Such a power is easy to dismiss. We can too easily be happy to call upon the power of love when we are in need of comfort from our sorrows but not as much when we feel our circumstances are in need of what we might assume is real power. Yet the witness of those who have followed Jesus along this way of the self-giving love of the cross is filled with witnesses to the capacity of that power to change lives and to open up ways for justice and freedom to reign where before there has seemed to be no way forward.

We see this power in the life of so many who have struggled for the freedom and dignity of others. We see this power in the life of Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, who cried out at the oppression his people suffered at the hands of the state. We see this power in the silent protest of Rosa Parks refusing to see her dignity to sit on a bus as any different to anyone else. We see this power in the life of John Lewis in his march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge a march that inspired a thousand marches for freedom in hope of a more just and equitable union for all God's people.

These are so many who have dedicated their lives to the hope that we can indeed achieve a revolution of power, that transfiguration is possible. For set within its proper theological relief, the story of the transfiguration is a story of the manifestation of light amid darkness, a proclamation that in the struggles against inequity the people of God had known for so very long, the holiness of the creator of the heavens and the earth was upon them, upon these overlooked and previously enslaved people. That through these lowly people the shekinah (sh-keen-ah) of God is present, they are where God's glory chooses to dwell. It is the story that proclaimed that in the words of theologian Thomas Currie, all people are called to be 'glory-bearing, glory-reflecting, and glory-bound'.

It can be easy and understandable in a week like this to give up on the hope that transfiguration is possible, that we can indeed live in a world where people are recognized as 'glory-bearing'. It can be easy to believe that whatever contribution we might make in the face of such vast and dominating power is too little to be counted. So, perhaps I can offer you some encouragement by taking your mind for a moment to another place and time of longing for transfiguration upon the long walk to freedom.

It was nearly twenty years ago now that I had the opportunity to stand in the prison cell that Nelson Mandela had lived in for nearly thirty years of his life. It is a room barely furnished and no bigger than a few feet wide and deep. There is a small, barred window that looks out, offering the one glimpse of light carried from the world beyond Robben Island. To stand and to look out between those bars was to stand in a place where hope had learned to dwell, where an inner light had learned to shine. The decades of oppression blacks in South Africa suffered, the people Mandela knew as friends and the countless others who died at the hands of others, the very personal losses in his family life, of not seeing his children grow, and the daily humiliations of prison life, all could so easily have broken his hope that the transfiguration of his country was possible. Yet something in him had been born, a hope which once experienced could never be defeated.

Writing later about that time, Mandela reflects, 'I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.'

May we fan that flame of goodness in the world about us. When we are invited to think less of another may we proclaim how we see more. When we are driven to despair for the future of the world, may we remember that not even death could contain the love of God that gives itself away to set all of us free. We are called to be proclaimers of hope in this present hour of the world's struggles. May we know the strength of that power in our own lives and may we show forth that love in word in deed for the sake of God's kingdom where justice and peace will indeed reign upon the earth. The time has come for a revolution of values, a revolution of power, a revolution characterized by a love that will transfigure us all. Amen. ✝

