**March 2, 2014 – Last Sunday after Epiphany – Transfiguration**

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On the last Sunday after Epiphany, we always hear one of the accounts of the Transfiguration. The actual Feast of the Transfiguration takes place on August 6th each year, and on that day we would read Luke’s version of the event. Nearly identical stories of the Transfiguration are found in all three of the synoptic Gospels, which means they almost certainly came from the same source story, but there isn’t one in John, because John always has to be a little different. That’s my opinion, not the scholars.

There are probably a lot of reasons why the Church focuses on this event on the last Sunday of Epiphany. One is that it forms a nice set of bookends around the season of Epiphany, along with the Baptism of Jesus, which we always celebrate on the first Sunday after Epiphany. Even the language that God uses referring to Jesus is the exactly the same in both events – “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” Biblical scholars love these things – they’re called *inclusios*. So Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of his earthly ministry, and the Transfiguration marks the beginning of the last journey to Jerusalem and his death on the Cross.

That’s all very interesting from a scholarly and storytelling point of view, but what does the event itself have to say to us today? Why do we read it on this day? Let’s look at it a little closer, focusing on Matthew’s version today. The event takes place six days after Peter’s confession, where he tells Jesus that he knows he is the anointed one sent by God. Between Peter’s confession and the climb up the mountain, however, Jesus tells his disciples in no uncertain terms what’s in store for him and for them when they get to Jerusalem. They’re not very happy about it – not so much for themselves, but for Jesus. They don’t want to believe that he is going to Jerusalem to die.

Then they get up to the mountain top and are witnesses to a fantastic event. Jesus is transformed before their very eyes, and glows with heavenly light. And then two heroes of the Jewish faith appear – Moses and Elijah – there with Jesus. It’s a fabulous thing to see, and Peter, Johnny on the spot, jumps up and says, “Hey, good thing we’re here to see this, Jesus! What’s say I put up three tents and the three of you guys can just stay here always. And, reading just a bit into what Peter’s saying, he might also be thinking that this way Jesus wouldn’t have to go down to his death in Jerusalem after all.

But before he had even gotten the suggestion completely out of his mouth, the mountain top was covered by a bright cloud and a voice out of heaven, a voice they knew to be God’s, said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

And it scared the SOCKS off of them. Or it would have, if they’d been wearing socks. But you get my point. It literally knocked them off of their feet. The word for “overshadowed” here is “*episkiadzó.*” This is way more than just a little cloud covering the sun for a bit. It means to completely encompass or envelop. It’s the same word that the Angel Gabriel uses with Mary when he tells her the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her.” Peter, James, and John were overwhelmed by the sheer power of God. No wonder they fell down!

It’s then that something wonderful happens. There they are, cowering on the ground unable to see or move, when a hand reaches out of the cloud and touches them. Jesus’ hand, his very human hand. His touch calms their fears, and when they finally look up, it’s only him standing there. Normal, everyday, Jesus, their friend and companion.

This very human touch is what I love about Matthew’s account of the Transfiguration, and it’s only found in Matthew. I’m still me, Jesus is saying. Don’t be afraid. I’m still here with you. This is the essence of the incarnation – God with us, Emmanuel. Not the glowing robes or hanging out with Moses and Elijah, or even God’s voice from heaven saying “This is my Son.” The real meaning of the incarnation and of God being revealed in the world through Jesus is in that very human caring touch. God came among us as a living, breathing, touching, human being.

And through God becoming human like us, he made us heirs of the Kingdom of God. We, too, are sons and daughters of God. However, for Jesus to be completely human means he, too, has to die. As our Eucharistic Prayer A says:

[W]hen we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

This is where we come to Lent. Just as Epiphany is the season for exploring and rejoicing in God’s light coming into the world, Lent is the season for contemplating that light being obscured for a time by darkness – the darkness of sin and indifference and hatred. However, we have the assurance that it won’t always be that way. Lent takes us on a journey through the valley of the shadow of death, but at the end of that journey the light will return and we will once again celebrate Easter and the risen Christ.

So our task this Lent is to take the hand Jesus offers us and walk fearlessly with him to Jerusalem. Walk with him through his temptation, betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. Mourn his death. But do it all with hope.

Hope because Easter IS coming and the heavenly light IS returning to the world. Hope because God is victorious over evil and over death. And hope because our sins are forgiven, and the promise of Jesus’ resurrection is also the promise of OUR resurrection and our reunion with all of those who have gone before us.

So as we enter the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday, let us do so with prayer and penitence and self-reflection, but also with the anticipation of what’s to come at the end of those forty days when, once again, we are able to say with joy, Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

Amen.