

Last Epiphany, Year A

February 3, 2008

RCL

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

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We all know what a witness is. At least those of us who watch Law and Order or any number of other crime shows on TV. The witness is all-important to the detective who needs to solve the crime in an hour's time. Witnesses make life easier for the cops, as long as they are willing to tell what they have seen, but as we veteran watchers know, they're not always willing.

Often there is risk involved. A witness may be in serious danger if someone doesn't like their testimony. Nobody signs up for this job. Witnesses are, most often, present by chance and not by design.

For the events we've just read about in today's gospel Jesus chooses the witnesses. It is by his design that Peter and James and John are the ones who climb with him up the mountain. He must know they will be good witnesses, that they have eyes to see and ears to hear and that they can be relied upon to tell what they see, when the time is right.

Peter has just declared to Jesus, 6 days before, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Yet the three have no idea, as they climb with him, what they will witness at the top of that mountain. Jesus will reveal himself to them in a way that they can see.

He does not do this in a crowd. Think of the media circus he would have created if he had revealed himself in this way just after feeding the crowd of 5000 people! Would they have been ready to believe, having just witnessed a miracle that filled their stomachs and then seeing him transformed, like a god, before them?

Apparently not. Because that's not what Jesus does. His revelation of his divine being demands a more intimate setting, only a small group of his disciples – 3 (which we may take as symbolic) – in a far-off, secluded place, the place, in fact, where the God of the Old Testament frequently appears. On a mountain.

And those who will witness have the openness to see, not only with their eyes but with their hearts, and to hear not only with their ears but with their hearts, and to remember until the time when God requires them to act as witnesses and to speak, not fearing power and influence and the threat of death.

They reach the top and suddenly Jesus is changed. His appearance is transfigured, his human form is glowing with light. It's as though all the goodness in him, all the light he carries inside can suddenly be seen on the outside. He is alive with light, flooded in glory. What an amazing sight it must have been!

And with Jesus, standing there beside him, are Moses and Elijah. They, too, have had God's glory revealed through them on mountaintops. To Moses God gave his Law to bring to the people and when he came down his face shone with God's light. To Elijah the prophet God spoke on the mountain \in the still small voice of silence.

Peter, James and John see the three talking together, as if the Law and the Prophets, who have led the way until now, have come to pass the torch to Jesus, who is God's new way of revealing God's self to the world.

And Peter, well Peter goes for his camera. Shoot. He forgot to put it in his pocket. And here is the perfect Kodak Moment. How he longs to capture this with a picture, to preserve it, to be able to hold it and keep it. But alas, the moment is gone. You know how it is with the ideal camera shot. So elusive.

Now there's a bright cloud over them all, like the cloud Moses must have entered as he went up to meet God. It encloses them, takes their breath away, and then the whole mountain shakes with the sound of God's voice saying, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

And just as suddenly, it's over. So quickly. Time has stood still, but only for a moment, and it's over now and Jesus is alone, as before, and saying "Don't tell anyone now. They won't understand until afterward."

And Peter and James and John follow Jesus down the mountain, amazed and dumbstruck at the extraordinary thing they have just seen.

We know that they prove to be reliable witnesses. Otherwise, how would we know this story? Look at what Peter writes in the part of his second letter read to us this morning, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths," he says. We didn't make it up! "We saw him receive honor and glory from God and this confirmed our faith in him. He is a lamp shining in a dark place. And this prophecy does not come from human will, not from our own lips, but we who have been moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

Jesus chose faithful witnesses in Peter and James and John. And now, following the apostles, the business of witnessing belongs to us.

Now, before you go out and buy a tee shirt please know that I'm not talking about the Witness movement that involves devotion to LeBron James. Most decidedly not.

I'm a fan of LeBron and of the Cavs like most Clevelanders, but what we're talking about this morning is in stark contrast to the popular movement surrounding this basketball hero.

Because the mountaintop experience we've been talking about is not hero worship. If we expect Jesus to be our champion and win all our games for us, then we have not understood his life and his death.

There are many reasons but dribble with me through four of them.

First, the experience of Jesus' glory is fleeting. We can't hold onto it or take a picture of it. It has to be experienced, taken in, internalized, and remembered. While LeBron's glory can be seen on his website 24/7, the transfiguration of Jesus is fleeting.

Second, the question of choice. The disciples did not choose to witness the transfiguration. They were called to it because of their openness to see and hear. There was no ad campaign to attract more. Jesus wanted only 3.

Third, this was no casual matter for them. It changed their lives to become witnesses to Jesus' true identity, and in the case of Peter and James, and perhaps also John, though his end is not fully known, it meant giving up their lives, dying, because there were those who did not like the testimony they gave.

Finally, and most importantly, being a witness for Christ does not lead to a position of privilege or influence, nor to winning, but rather it leads to a life of servanthood. It leads to losing our lives in order to find them, to serving others by giving ourselves, to fulfilling the promises we make in baptism. In these things lies the victory.

This week we begin our observance of the season of Lent. Today is the last day for a while when we can sing and shout "Alleluia." As we process out today the children will join us, carrying out the "Alleluia" banner, and it will remain out of the church while we spend some weeks examining our hearts, denying ourselves certain indulgences, practicing servanthood to others, witnessing to our faith that Jesus is indeed the Son of God.

Then, when we again shout "Alleluia" at Easter we will do so as better witnesses of what we have seen with our hearts, the presence of God in the world he has created. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria