



Christ Church + Washington Parish

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**Last Sunday after Epiphany Year C
February 14, 2010**

**Sermon preached by Interim Rector, the Rev. Martha E. Wallace, JD, MSM, M.Div
At Christ Church Washington Parish**

This morning we have two stories of people with shining faces. The first was Moses, whose conversations with God left him with a face so radiant that people could not bear to look on it. He had to wear a veil when he appeared before people to shield them from the sight of God's glory reflected in his shining face. The Gospel reading features Moses, too, this time joined by Elijah, and Jesus for a conversation on a mountain top. The significance of Jesus in conversation with Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the greatest prophet was hard to miss, as it placed Jesus squarely in Judaism's religious hall of fame—a kind of Mt. Rushmore of Judaism – The Lawgiver, The Prophet and the Messiah - or so it must have seemed to Peter, James and John, who knew well that the return of Elijah was the sign that the Messiah was coming.



What Jesus, Moses and Elijah are discussing is not as clear in our translation as it was in the original Greek. The New Revised Standard Version from which we read says "*They were speaking of his departure which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*" However, the word translated as departure was the same word used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for Moses' escape from Egypt with the Hebrew people through the Red Sea. They are discussing Jesus' impending death, yet they didn't use the word 'death' for what was about to happen, nor did they speak of it as something that would happen *to* him. They used the word 'exodus,' and they spoke of it as something *he* would *accomplish.*" Sort of shines a new light on the crucifixion when you put it that way, doesn't it? But that is a matter for another sermon...

Today we are talking about shining faces and about transfiguration and Peter, James, and John being dazzled by what they see and the voice out of the cloud reminding them who Jesus is and what the appropriate response is: This is my beloved son. Listen to him. Good advice for them and good advice for us. It helps us remember who this is all about and what our appropriate response is: Pay attention.

The whole history of Israel after Moses is an account of God's continuing struggle to bring a wandering people to back to pay attention to their God. Even after their mountaintop experience, God had to struggle to get Peter, James, and John to pay attention. Peter who was so enthusiastic about the mountain top experience is the same guy who denies Jesus three times in the face of the cross. Human failure to comprehend, let alone live up to divine revelation is a hard fact of life. We can rejoice in an exalted passage of scripture, be blown away by the beauty of the earth, be moved to tears by a poem or a painting, we can find great joy in receiving holy communion, or marvel at the goodness of God in our midst, and then go out and live our lives no differently than before! It is just hard for us human beings to keep God in mind all the time when our lives are so full of competing demands. The good news is that just as God did not give up on the children of Israel, did not give up on Peter and the other apostles, so God never gives up on us, never abandons us to failure, continues to call us back to attention.

Lent is about offering ourselves to God and allowing God to make of us what he will. Lent is also about the faithful determination of God to engage us and assist us in the struggle for transformation. We will falter and resist and even momentarily defect, perhaps.

This particular mountain top experience intrigues me. I wonder whether Jesus actually was transfigured before their eyes. Now before you go running off to the Bishop to report my heresy, what I mean is that maybe Jesus was not transfigured so much as he was revealed. Maybe Jesus really looked that way all the time, but we human beings could not see it. Maybe the miracle on the mountaintop was not so much that Jesus was changed, but that the disciples were changed for an instant, so that they could see him as he really was all the time - shining and brilliant and beyond what words can describe, before they were overcome and had to look away, because human eyes just aren't made for looking on God. Maybe Jesus wore a veil of flesh the way Moses put on the veil of cloth to shield people's eyes from what was too dazzling for them.

For an instant Peter and James and John were able to see Jesus as he really was before they had to fall to the ground and shield their eyes. Maybe they were the ones who were transformed, and I suggest that they were transformed - not right away and not all at once, but over time. They may not have gotten it up on the mountain, or even at the empty tomb, but God did not give up on them and ultimately, they were transformed and set about being the instruments of God in transforming the world. Peter and James and John were just ordinary men, with nothing particularly distinctive about them, yet they went on to lay down the foundations of a church that has persisted for two thousand years.

Through Jesus, we are all being transformed day by day, bit by bit. Not into dazzling beings of light - but into beacons of love. It is not an instantaneous process, but God keeps after us, keeps reminding us to pay attention and we have to keep at it, too, keep offering ourselves to God for guidance and pruning.

Herein lies the deep meaning of Lent, which begins this week. You see, Lent is not just about giving up chocolate or some other thing we love for six and a half weeks or even about saying one more prayer a day during that time in order to fulfill some religious obligation. Lent is about offering

ourselves to God and allowing God to make of us what he will. Lent is also about the faithful determination of God to engage us and assist us in the struggle for transformation. We will falter and resist and even momentarily defect, perhaps. But God continues to love us, to shine upon us, transforming us almost imperceptibly, one degree at a time with love. As we enter into Lent, open your hearts and let that love in. Then open your hearts and let that love out, so that you also might be God's instruments for transforming the world. May it be so.