

Faith Touched By Lent: Solidarity

Luke 9:28-45a

First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

February 14, 2010

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“Look at that sermon title,” you might say to me. “I think you can’t wait for Lent to begin.” Lent is a religious term for the season of 40 Monday-through-Saturday days preceding Easter. The word itself has Old English roots; and it refers to the “lengthening” of sunlight-time each day as the season moves farther from the beginning of Winter and closer to the beginning of Spring. So Lent doesn’t start until this coming Wednesday, and its first Sunday is still a week away; but I want to tell you, “I can always wait for Lent to begin!”

Here’s why: Lent reminds us of themes related to the energy-and-emotion-draining toll of Jesus’ temptations and to the energy-and-emotion-draining toll of his personal care for people under stress. Lent reminds us of themes related to the energy-and-emotion-draining toll on Jesus amid his struggles with sin and death. Lent reminds us of Jesus’ experience of betrayal and being abandoned, of his arrest, being sentenced to death, and his execution and burial. I can always wait for Lent to begin, because, while certainly not to the degree of Jesus, I experience enough of that “tough stuff” in real life day by day to know that it’s plenty enough; and it’s all I want to experience. I usually need no extra reminder of Lenten themes ahead of the 7 week Lenten season prior to Easter. And my guess is that you don’t need any extra reminders of human struggle and agony either.

The Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain with Peter, James, and John, however, is the traditional Gospel reading for the last Sunday preceding the beginning of Lent. The Transfiguration story traditionally been interpreted as advancing a particular theme important to Lent: a theme recognizing Jesus’ unique identity as the one who, though crucified until dead and buried, is the resurrected-beyond-death Messiah of God. Arguably, the Gospel writers, through this vision-beholding-story, convey the impression that a bright-as-sunlight clarity has been granted to Peter, James, and John, and to the infant church of which, in a very few months, they will become leaders.

For over 50 years, without exception, I’ve thought of the Transfiguration of Jesus only in the most traditional way: that Jesus on the mountaintop with the spiritual presence of Moses and Elijah conveys a message to Peter, James, and John – a message from God about Jesus’ triumphant Lordship, in spite of his suffering and death, conveying that, no matter what happens, Jesus is absolutely the fulfillment of everything God has done through the tradition of Moses and Elijah, through the tradition of Covenant and Prophets.

As of this year, I’m convinced of the additional importance of a different interpretation. I’m now convinced that the Transfiguration of Jesus conveys God’s message not exclusively about Jesus’ triumphant Lordship, but additionally about God’s

affirming presence with God's people in the most vulnerable of situations. Call this "solidarity," God's solidarity with God's people.

Think about Moses' life in extremely vulnerable situations: Born to a Hebrew slave family in Pharaoh's Egypt, then, as a young adult, he flees to the hinterlands to avoid prosecution in Egypt; he perceived a call from God to go back to Egypt and request an audience with Pharaoh even though he had no diplomatic credentials; he senses desperation on the beach-of-the-sea with Pharaoh's army closing fast on the heels of the escaping former slaves; he is frustrated beyond words in the wilderness with people who want to turn the clock back to the familiarity of their former life, in spite of the fact that their former life included being subjected to forced labor as slaves. In all of that and more, the Lord of heaven and earth met Moses' vulnerability with side-by-side solidarity.

Similarly to Moses' life, think about Elijah's life in extremely vulnerable situations: During a great drought, he was hiding in the brush alongside a creek-bed and being fed by ravens. Pursued by the royal posse of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, he headed to the hills and prayed to God expressing unquestionable despair because he felt absolutely alone. In all of that and more, the Lord of heaven and earth met Elijah's vulnerability with side-by-side solidarity.

And what about Jesus' life in the most vulnerable situations of his ministry? Like Moses, he was born into a political situation wherein baby boys were condemned on the basis of their being male; like both Moses and Elijah, in the wilderness finding his personal identity, his spiritual identity, and his public identity; like both Moses and Elijah, finding himself in situations where agonizing prayer was essential, with trust in God hardly coming easily. Through Jesus' ministry, through Jesus' being betrayed, through his arrest, trial, conviction, execution, and burial, God joins with and meets Jesus' vulnerability with side-by-side solidarity.

Even though Christian traditions have mostly interpreted the Transfiguration of Jesus more like a United States' Presidential political party nomination, with the blinding spotlight on the mountain lacking only loud music, confetti, or a colorful balloon drop, prior to the foggy cloud rolling in, in itself a symbol of God's mysterious presence, I'm yet thinking of an additional interpretation: that the Lord of heaven and earth meets Jesus' vulnerability like the Lord met Moses' and Elijah's vulnerability – with side-by-side solidarity.

You may remember how, in the stage musical, "Fiddler on the Roof," the "signature" song is, "Tradition." If a 20th or 21st century musical were made about the Transfiguration, the theme song might stem from the word, "solidarity."

"Solidarity! Solidarity!"

As a word in English, "solidarity" perhaps developed its most popular usage at the beginning of the 1980s. At that time, the shipyard workers in Gdansk, Poland, initiated their protest against old-line Communism. They eventually won the right to expand that protest and partner with other groups throughout their homeland, working

for reforms with an increased “flavor” of democracy and capitalism. The resulting, wide-spread, union organization was named, “Solidarity.”

So is the preacher today suggesting that Jesus is a Polish shipyard worker? Not exactly. Last time we checked, Jesus was a homeless Palestinian, an unemployed carpenter, a religious preacher without official recognition or income. His life might have been slightly improved as a Polish shipyard worker.

I’m simply saying to you, while, for most of my life, I’ve never thought deeper or wider than the Christian Church’s traditional, across-the-centuries interpretation of this story, I’m now more helped to look at this mountain-top event as one which is much less than a backwoods coronation, and much more *an affirming reminder of God’s holy solidarity in Jesus with all, like Moses and Elijah, who experience despair and/or agony, who experience guilt and/or apathy, who experience marginalization and/or arrogance, who experience success and/or failure.* That would be all of us. That would also be all other people, our sister and brothers, each created in God’s image and redeemed in God’s love.

I’m confessing to you that I’ve failed to see this “other angle” on this story for all these years. I don’t feel shame about that, but some sadness to whatever extent I may have missed out on the richness of this story for others and myself: God’s solidarity with ALL in the midst of our human struggles and identity. I may have, for many years, missed this rich angle on the story of Jesus’ association with Moses and Elijah, who themselves experienced gut-wrenching worry and even fear; but there’s every reason to be strengthened today and tomorrow amid my own human struggles and my own identity, and to be strengthened with all others! God, in this Jesus, is right here with us – in solidarity – urging and imploring us to stand by and lift up one another.

If you and I are convinced in the least of the potential solidarity of God with God’s people, we have no excuse not to give thanks for that sacred, grace-filled solidarity of this One with us, and to practice the same with others.

– All honor and praise be to God.