

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, February 7, 2016, Last Epiphany, Year C

Luke 9:28-36

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

Background and general observations

The season after the Epiphany concludes with one of the most powerful epiphanies of all – the Transfiguration. This story comes at the center of Luke's story, between Jesus' baptism and his resurrection. Jesus takes his "inner circle" of disciples, Peter, James and John, up a high mountain. (These are the same disciples whom Jesus will take with him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus will be deeply troubled.)

As we know, a mountaintop is understood to be a place for divine encounter – Moses received the Ten Commandments and covenant there; Elijah experienced God in "a still small voice" there; and Jesus of course delivered the "Sermon on the Mount" there.

It is here, on a mountain, where Jesus is "transfigured" before the disciples. There is an otherworldly quality to this event, as we read that the appearance of Jesus' face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. The appearance of Moses and Elijah perhaps symbolizes the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). Their appearance with Jesus clearly places him in a position of prominence, and some have suggested that this event symbolizes the fact that Jesus is the fulfillment or summary or goal of all of the Law and the Prophets. In other words, Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew scripture.

The often-impetuous Peter can't contain himself and speaks (blurts?) first, proposing that they build a memorial or dwelling places on the sight. Is this the all-too-human attempt to institutionalize that which cannot be institutionalized? Does Peter simply not want this moment to end?

Then, from a cloud comes a voice, saying in effect the same thing that was said at Jesus' baptism, "This is my Son, my Chosen"; but with the additional command, "listen to him!" This is not a time for talking or planning. It is simply a time to listen, and that can be hard for many of us.

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. The fact that even Jesus' inner circle of disciples do not seem to understand divine occurrences, sometimes say very inappropriate things, and even let Jesus down when the going gets tough (falling asleep in Gethsemane), might give us some relief – when we blow it with regard to God, we might remember that even the inner circle or cream of the crop failed miserably at times. But the fact that Jesus had an inner circle at all might remind us of just how important it can be to have an “inner circle” ourselves – special people we love, trust and rely upon. Who might be in your “inner circle”? What makes a person the right one to be in such a trusted and important position in one's life? How might you be such a person to someone in your life?
2. Some have said about the Transfiguration that this event is an “unveiling,” that the disciples are simply able to see Jesus clearly for who he is in all his glory. It's not that something has happened to change Jesus, it's just that the disciples are seeing things, for a brief moment, as they really are. The veil has been lifted for a moment, and what used to seem quite ordinary now is seen as it really is.

When have you experienced such an unveiling? Have you gone through much of your life thinking of the people and places around you as being “ordinary” and unremarkable but then saw things differently? Out of the blue, have you been filled with wonder and gratitude at the splendor and beauty of your life and of the people and places around you? What do you think of the possibility that such moments of splendor that inspire our awe and gratitude are really just an unveiling of the deeper truth about our lives that we unfortunately miss all too often? How can we more often position ourselves to see the world aright, in all its glory, instead of going through our lives with a feeling that things are humdrum or ordinary?

3. The Greek word that Luke uses for the transfiguration is the same word that Paul uses to describe the change that is to take place within ourselves: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (transfigured) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2) What do you think this transformation or transfiguration of yourself is all about? Is this the point of being a Christian – that we pattern our lives in such a way and turn our attention to such divine things, so that we are transformed? Do you sense yourself being so transformed at times?
4. An Episcopal monk once wrote: “Almost everyone I know in the church complains about being too busy. We know being busy probably isn't very good for us. Most of us have been so busy for so long and accomplished so little that we are quick to admit to the futility of all of this activity. But I wonder how often we see all of the busyness as sin. I wonder how often we see it as a kind of avoidance of being drawn into the real worship of God. I wonder if we realize how much our prayer suffers because of the lack of space in our lives. Not that we don't make time for prayer. We may be quite faithful about carving out the time for prayer. But how often are we willing to surround the prayer with the solitude and

leisure which is so important for listening to God? ... There are probably too many workshops in the Church and not enough places of silence and quiet.” (from an old SSJE newsletter, written by the late Thomas Shaw, who was the superior then and later the bishop of Massachusetts)

It has been said that God gave ten commandments on the mountaintop in the Old Testament and only one commandment in the New Testament: “Listen to him (Jesus).” Do these reflections help you understand the importance of listening? Is your busyness an unconscious attempt to avoid this kind of listening? What keeps you from devoting more time to quiet and listening?