

Sermon for August 6, 2019 – “Responding to the Divine”

Transfiguration Sunday, Year C – Text: Luke 9:28-43

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Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson decide to go on a camping trip. After dinner, they lay down for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. “Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.” Watson replied, “I see millions of stars.” “What does that tell you?” Watson pondered for a minute. “Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we’ll have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?” Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke, “Watson, you idiot. Someone has stolen our tent!”

We’re talking about tents this morning and my minds drifted back this week to my Boy Scout days when we would go on camping trips. For my first few years in Scouts we slept in old canvas tents. These tents weren’t like the well ventilated lightweight tents that we have today. These things looked like they came from an army surplus store and were left over from World War I, if not the Civil War. I mean, these things were awful! They had no floors, so they were a nightmare if it rained. They got incredibly hot in the summer. They weren’t waterproof so if there were more than a day or so of rain they’d get absolutely soaked and were not something that you wanted to spend a lot of time in. Still, for some odd reason I remember these tents with more than a little fondness in my heart. And so we begin our discussion of Peter’s suggestion to build three tents as he along with James and John were confronted by the events of the Transfiguration. Now, is it just me but does Peter’s suggestion of building three tents on such an occasion seem like an interruption in the flow of the story and stand as yet another example of Peter saying exactly the wrong thing? This story appears in all three synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke which, in itself makes it worthy of serious consideration. And to Mark and Luke, both gentiles, the idea of erecting tents on such an occasion must have seemed pretty silly because they both make excuses for Peter. Mark comments on Peter’s idea by saying, “He did not know what to say because he was terrified.” Luke shortens Mark’s comment simply to, “...not knowing what he had said.” Matthew seems to be the only gospel writer to think Peter’s up to something worthwhile because he leaves out commentary entirely. Now, Matthew, being a Jew, may be on to something. I say that because the Greek word that all three gospel writers attribute to Peter to describe what he offers to build is “skenas.” It’s usually translated in one of three ways. As tents, dwellings (or dwelling places), or tabernacles. What’s interesting is that this same word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint to describe the Tent or Tabernacle of Meeting which we all know was used in the time of the Exodus by Moses and the ancient Israelites as the portable earthly dwelling place of God. It was God’s house until the Temple in Jerusalem was built.

All this being the case is it really any big surprise that when the disciples react in all probability the way **we** would react to something like this, something inexplicable - the sight of the transfiguration - Is it any wonder that God shows up appearing in a cloud? Perhaps this cloud is a visual ignorance, a veil of missed comprehension. Christ stands before us transfigured and all we can do, like Peter, is to suggest tent-building. God, however, doesn't seem to be too interested in our tents. God seemingly interrupts Peter without justifying his idea with a response. Instead, God is bubbling over with adoration. **"This is my son in whom I am well pleased."** "Should we make a tent for Him then God?" "No – listen to Him." Sounds simple enough but listening to Him involves us confronting our fears. Are we afraid to live our lives in ways that God believes is possible? In ways He's called us to live? In ways He's created us to live? Well, to get at that we need to point out that six days before the Transfiguration, according to Matthew, Jesus confronts His disciples with the question, "Who do you say that I am?" I imagine that the emphasis isn't on the "I" but on the "you." How we answer it, and we've talked about in the past, is important. It reveals a lot about us. And let's face it, Christ's love for us can at times make us quite uncomfortable. Largely in the **way** that He loves and the degree to which He loves.

Jesus loves us outside the tent. Jesus walks through the cloud of our ignorance and touches us and sometimes we haven't a clue as to how to respond. So, I'm thinking that these tents in some ways symbolize our impulsive response to the divine. When the divine becomes apparent we try to build it shelter, hold on to it. Instead of basking in the light of the transfiguration we want to contain it, build something elaborate around it. Maybe even charge a small fee for others to see it. Sure, we think this is best for the divine. This is our God and He needs our protection; protection under the tents of our doctrines, our traditions, our understandings, and our explanations. In fact, human beings are naturals at tentmaking. Douglas John Hall in his book, *The Cross in Our Context*, "One suspects that our Western concepts of God are the answers that we give to depth experiences that are too basically unsettling to remain undefined, unnamed. Better name it straightaway otherwise what control can we claim?"

The tents that we build as a response to the divine experience are our attempts to define and name the divine. Our human tendency is to feel uncomfortable with the divine. We can't just stand with our mouths agape. Though ignorance breeds fear, the reverse is true as well. We're afraid of our ignorance...well, some of the time, anyway. We don't like to think that we don't know so we just pretend to know. Think about it, how many of us have latched on to a few ideas that are comfortable to us then constructed self-centered realities around these comfortable ideas? What am I talking about you ask? Well, we say that God hates something, usually something with which we're uncomfortable and which often doesn't apply to us and so by saying that God hates it, it makes us comfortable because it takes the spotlight off us. The world is so much more manageable when we stake our claim on the idea that God hates something rather than on the idea that God loves everyone because we can then point the finger at someone or something else instead of claiming our own sinfulness. Building walls to keep the "other" out is a lot easier than letting Christ in. But, in Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter two) after describing the apparently sinful culture in which the Roman Christians find themselves, he asks those disciples, who are we to judge? Maybe we should just leave that up to God and concentrate on loving our neighbor. Christ isn't waiting for us to build a tent for Him no matter how elaborate.

At one point, King David decided that he wanted to build God a temple as elaborate as the palace in which he lived. Surprisingly, God's response was an emphatic "No!" In fact, God says, in effect, "When did I ever ask you to build Me a house?" The lesson to be learned is that God is eternal as is God's grace. It is from ever-lasting to ever-lasting. On the other hand canvas disintegrates, wood rots, walls crumble, and God cannot be contained, certainly not by anything built by human beings. In fact, the only thing that is able to stand is what God Himself has built. The most common being the human heart. It's God's preferred dwelling place. So, instead of building a tent we must open our hearts to God's presence, to God's grace. But we must also be prepared to be transformed, transfigured.

It's occurred to me that the Transfiguration was a trailer of sorts, a preview of what was to come. Certainly, Easter and the resurrection, what Peter, James and John saw, was a glimpse of the resurrected Christ in all His glory but I also think that it was a look into what each of us has the potential to become. Paul writes about this in 2nd Corinthians, **"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; For this comes from the Lord, the Spirit."** And here, brothers and sisters, is the thing...at the top of the mountain of transfiguration Jesus shows the disciples the glorious nature of the Christ. And it seems to me that it might be impossible to entirely wrap our minds around the simple light and beauty of the transfiguration. It's beyond ordinary. It's beyond extraordinary. Way beyond. Right when we think we have the right answers to the question, "Who do you say that I am?", the reality of the Christ melts our minds and surrounds us like a cloud. We try to build appropriate shrines and we don't even begin to get it. Our knees buckle. What is this grand vision? This awe inspiring light? Is it a taste of some transcendent deity? No, it's pure humanity. It is fearless, unbounded love.

Christ never lets us disciples off the hook. He asks us if we would like to join Him on Golgotha. He tells us that we will do all He has done and more. Christ's radiant face is the potential for ALL creation, most especially those whom He's created and called very good, those created in His own image. Are you willing to believe the miracle? Are you willing to look for the shining face of Christ when you look in the mirror? Seems almost unthinkable doesn't it? Yet, with the awesome beauty of our **true** nature comes an awesome responsibility, an awesome task for us to complete. Because no sooner is the glimpse of glory over when we walk down the mountain with Christ back into the valley of the shadow of death to look into the faces of others created in His image, neighbors we're commanded to love. Back into places where children are possessed by demons and seemingly unable to be cast out. In the valley, things aren't so shiny. But transformed by the vision of the transfigured Christ fresh in our minds, we will fear no evil for He is with us. His rod and staff protect us!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.