



SERMONS THAT WORK

Last Sunday after Epiphany Year C

Forever Changed

[RCL]: Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

To see God is to be changed. For the last several weeks, during this season following the Epiphany, we have journeyed alongside those who first came to the realization that Jesus might actually be the Messiah for whom they had waited.

They watched as heaven opened and heard a voice proclaiming, “This is my Son,” standing on the banks of the Jordan River. They tasted the water that had become “good wine” at a wedding in Cana. They listened as he taught in the synagogue and heard him profess that in him, that day, the scripture had been fulfilled. They watched—or possibly even participated in—the angry crowd which drove him out of the synagogue but could not destroy him. They pressed in on him to hear him teach. They obeyed him when he told them, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” They witnessed signs and believed. They heard him and felt hope as he declared, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” They wrestled as he taught them to love their enemies and to “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Some were amazed, others became angry, multitudes found hope, and a handful left everything and followed him.

But all were forever changed.

How could they not be? How could we not be?

Our interactions with others, not only with God, change us because proximity changes our perspective in an irreversible way. There is no reliable process to unknow what we have seen, experienced, or participated in. This is perhaps why the old adage is that “ignorance is bliss,” because sometimes we don’t want to be changed. We so often want to forget the challenging things that we have learned and return to a time when we were comfortably blissful in our unknowing. As the Philosopher wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:18, “In much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.”

Through our experiences, we gain knowledge, and knowledge stubbornly refuses to let us remain the same.

If this is true—that we are changed by our everyday interactions with others—how could we not be changed when we come into contact with God, the Holy One whose greatness we have been called to proclaim?

Who can see God and remain the same? Who can see God and not be forever changed?

There is a story in the Hebrew Bible of a prophet named Moses who was called by God to lead the people of Israel out of bondage and into the land the Lord had promised them. Like so many stories in the Bible, the epic of Moses leading the people of Israel through the desert is full of twists and turns, success and failures. The people of Israel tended to be their own worst enemy—like we are, sometimes—setting up unnecessary obstacles for themselves and allowing themselves to be distracted by lesser gods.

The people of Israel had been led out of bondage, but they still needed direction. Not just directions of where to turn or how far to go in their journey toward the Promised Land, but also directions for how to live as a people who had been chosen and called by God to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6).

These directions were given to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai. The people of Israel camped at the base of the mountain and Moses went up to receive instruction and to see God, but when he came down from the Mount and returned to the people of Israel, he was unaware of how this interaction with God had changed him. He descended the mountain not only with tablets containing the Ten Commandments but also with his face brightly shining – a result of his coming into proximity with God. He was unaware until he realized that the people were struck with fear by the change in his appearance.

Moses came into contact with God and he was changed. Not only in appearance, but deep down in the core of his being. He had come close to the Holy One. He had seen God and he had been changed—forever.

How could he not be?

As a result of this encounter, Moses began to wear a veil over his face when he addressed the people. It should be noted that Moses was not only changed in a personal or private way by his encounter with God, but it was such a life-altering event that it also changed the ways that he interacted and communicated with others. So, this life-changing experience was not an isolated, personal, religious experience, but a very public thing that changed the life of Moses.

This experience reverberated through both the ancient Jewish and Christian communities. Over a thousand years later, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth and compared the transformation of Moses on Mount Sinai to the conversion of one’s mind when one comes to faith in God through Christ. He writes, “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” (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul, whose life had been drastically changed by his own encounter with God, could speak from firsthand experience.

To see God is to be changed, but does this change occur in the same way for all people, across all of time and in every context?

This morning, we are reminded in our Gospel passage of another mountaintop encounter with God. The Gospel author tells us that about eight days after Peter had acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus and a small group of his closest friends and disciples had slipped away from the crowds to go up the mountain and pray.

Peter, James, and John had already given up everything to follow Jesus. They had heard his teaching, they had asked questions, and they had witnessed the miraculous. Yet it wasn't until this time and place that their eyes were opened to see Jesus the Christ in his true appearance, flanked by two of the greatest prophets of their faith.

“They saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

They had walked with Jesus, but it wasn't until this very moment that their eyes were transformed to see Christ transfigured before them. They heard the voice of God: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

They couldn't un-see what they had witnessed—reality peeled back to give a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. They were changed. How could they not be?

When they descended the mountain, they kept silent and told no one of what they had seen and experienced. They were immediately confronted by a man whose son had been seized by an evil spirit. The demon dramatically dashed the boy against the ground, but Jesus was unfazed. He rebuked the spirit, healed the young boy, and returned him to his father.

“And all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

They had seen God and their lives were changed. How could they not be?

Like Moses who saw God on the mountaintop or the people who witnessed the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God through the life of Christ on earth, like the disciples who couldn't quite recognize the true identity of Jesus until he was transfigured before their eyes or the demon-possessed boy who was restored and healed by an encounter with Christ amongst the crowd, we too are forever changed when we see and encounter God.

How could we not be?