

Divergence on the Lectionary - Last Sunday after the Epiphany

First Reading

Exodus 24:12–18

The LORD said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses rose with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. And he said to the elders, “Wait here for us until we return to you. And behold, Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a dispute, let him go to them.”

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Peter 1:16–21

For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 17:1–9

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there

appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

This Sunday, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent, is always devoted to the event we know as “the Transfiguration.” The season focused on the showing forth, the *epiphaneo* of Jesus is bookended by the voice of God declaring that this is His Son, first at Jesus’ baptism, then at His Transfiguration.

The reading from Exodus to accompany the Transfiguration provides us with its antetype. Moses goes up the mountain to receive the tablets. He is accompanied by Joshua, his most trusted follower. They are enveloped by a cloud and God’s voice emanates from the cloud.

This is the first giving of the Tablets of the Law to Moses. It is these that he throws to the ground and breaks when he comes down off the mountain and finds the people worshipping the golden calf in chapter 32. He goes to receive the second set in chapter 34.

It’s difficult to read this passage or its mate in chapter 34 without imposing our images from the Transfiguration on it when we read it in this context, but let’s try to let it stand on its own for a moment. Here are the people God has chosen for Himself, freshly delivered from bondage in Egypt, huddled together at the foot of the mountain. They are barely a people at all, descendents of Jacob, but having no identity beyond family lineage. They will not be a people of a particular land until they enter the land of promise, which turns out to take them more than forty years.

Calling Moses up the mountain to receive the tablets then is so much more than just giving the people some rules to live by. It is giving them an identity. The tablets become

a focus for identity. And they have a precursor. Some 3-500 years earlier, depending on how you date the Exodus (Scholars generally date the Exodus either in the mid 15th century B.C. or the early-to-mid 13th century B.C.) Hammurabi, king of Babylon set down the earliest known set of laws for a people, inscribed on a great obelisk. These laws set that people apart as a people governed by law.

But law given by a man. A king, yes, but a man.

And here God gives His people a set of stone tablets on which are inscribed His law. In doing this He gives them an identity beyond family, beyond blood. They are a people of Law, of God-given Law. And it is inscribed on stone.

How do you define your identity? What is God's gift to you that says who you are?

Second Reading

Our reading from 2 Peter this week can be read as a confirmation of the Gospel text that is to follow. (There is considerable scholarly question about the authorship of 2 Peter, but I leave that aside for now. I don't think it matters much whether he wrote it or it was written in his name.) That is, it is Peter's account of the Transfiguration event emphasizes the words spoken over Jesus in that moment, "This is my beloved Son." I noticed as I pondered these verses that there is a shift, though. In Exodus God conveys identity to a people. On the Mount of Transfiguration God confers identity/glory on Jesus, an individual. I'll get into that more when I write on the Gospel passage. I think that matters.

But again, I'd like to allow our lesson from 2 Peter to speak on its own, rather than get swallowed up by the enormity of the Transfiguration event. Yes, Peter witnessed it, and yes, he give us his account of it here, but the Transfiguration isn't the point of the passage. It serves as a support for Peter's argument that what he has told to the churches to whom he's writing has authority. It isn't "cleverly devised myths." Furthermore, everything he witnessed is confirmation of the "prophetic words" of Scripture, which themselves proceeded not from the will of man, but from the moving of the Holy Spirit.

If I follow that line of thought carefully, what I see Peter doing here is this. He is grounding his proclamation of the Gospel in his own experience of the revelation on the mountain, but even more deeply in the prophetic utterances of the Scriptures, which were, of course, the Hebrew Scriptures at that point. He advises those to whom he writes to continue to look to those prophecies as to a light in a dark place.

Something new and earth-shaking is happening. It is important for Peter to ground that something in the past. This new thing has roots, it hasn't sprung from nothing. It isn't a "cleverly devised myth." It makes me think that this must have been a criticism that the Gospel encountered. And that makes it easier to understand why Peter felt it necessary to ground it in his own experience and in the experience of God's people in ages past.

And that takes me back to the work of evangelism. It seems to me that Peter has laid out two important elements to talking about Jesus. Our own experience and the experiences of ages past. I think both are important, and probably function better together in that order. First, this is my experience. Second, this is how it meshes with how others (in the Scriptures) also encountered God. I think it works better to start off with, "This is how God loved me," before charging into John 3:16.

Just a thought.

Gospel Text

I'll start off by saying that for the purposes of studying Matthew this year, I wish that we had the Gospel text for Year C instead of this one for Transfiguration. Liturgically, this one makes better sense in the first year of a three year cycle. Moses goes up the mountain, Jesus goes up the mountain. I get it. But in year C Moses comes down the mountain with the second set of tablets, and *his face shines*.

This is particularly important because of the way that it explains Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' face in our reading this week. In Luke, Jesus' face is changed. In Mark there is no mention of Jesus' face at all. Only in Matthew does Jesus' face "shine like the sun." Remember how important it is that Matthew's congregation understand that Jesus is "the prophet like Moses" that was promised in Deuteronomy 18:15. So, for reasons of studying Matthew, I think Year C's text works a little better. Liturgically, this one makes better sense.

But for Matthew, Jesus is not just the fulfillment of the Law (Moses) but of the Law *and* the Prophets (Moses *and* Elijah). The Transfiguration is for Matthew the same kind of confirmation that it was for Peter, a confirmation of the fulfillment of prophecy. As important as Moses is to Matthew, the emphasis on prophecy is equally important. Matthew makes reference to prophecy at least 21 times. Mark, four. Luke, 12. John 10. Like Peter, Matthew is determined to ground his Gospel in "the prophets." I would venture to suggest here that the reason for this is his Jewish congregation. The last few weeks we've heard portions of the Sermon on the Mount, during which Jesus has thoroughly shifted what it means to fulfill the Law. His actions and teachings elsewhere also call into question what it means to be law-observant. I tend to think that this is why

it is more important to Moses than to other evangelists to anchor Jesus in the other half of “the writings,” that is, “the prophets.”

Before I quit this week, I'd like to get back to that shift that occurs between Mount Sinai and the Mount of Transfiguration. In the first, I'd suggest that God is conveying, through the gift of the Law, identity on a people. In the second God declares the identity of Jesus, an individual. I think that's important for us as individual Christians. I am sometimes saddened by the way that my denomination, the Episcopal Church, has nearly eradicated any mention of me as an individual from our worship and theology. Not quite. We still have the Apostles' Creed, which we recite when we have baptisms and often on First Epiphany. And some preaching still focuses on the single person. But apart from that there is (to me) too great an emphasis on the church as the collective to the exclusion of the individual.

As with so many imbalances, I think this one results from an overreaction to a negative. That negative would be the nearly exclusive emphasis on the individual in large swaths of American Christianity. But the pendulum has swung much too far in the other direction. We are a “body” of Christians who were called as individuals and who continue to be called as individuals. Evangelism, something that's very difficult for us, happens on the individual level, and when we erase the individual too well, we lose our ability to evangelize. People need to hear God call them by name, to take their hand, theirs alone and lift them from their own bondage. As they mature, they'll grow to see that in the light of God's saving grace for a “people.” They'll learn to appreciate themselves as part of a larger body, but that never eliminates the need to hear, “You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased.”

Some would perhaps argue that what I'm saying is the product of Western individualism. It may be. But I think Western individualism is the heir of the Christian notion that we are each called by name, each known, each valued.