

The Fearful God of Sinai and the Loving God of Valentine's Day
A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church
Transfiguration Sunday
February 14, 2010
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Exodus 34: 29-35
Luke 9: 28-36

This is Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday before the beginning of Lent. Every year the gospel reading tells the story of Jesus on the mountain peak, stands alone in glory blazing; let us, if we dare to speak join the saints and angels praising: Hallelujah! (VU 102: v1). The scriptures for today tell the story about Jesus being transfigured in front of his disciples on the top of a mountain where he had gone to pray. His face and clothes became a dazzling white, just the same as Moses' face was changed when he met with God on Mount Sinai and received the Ten Commandments. The traditional teaching from these stories is that when you encounter God you become a changed person. It's not something that happens to everyone and is not necessarily something to be wished for. The Hebrew people who came with Moses into the wilderness were told not to go near Mount Sinai when God was there or they would die (Ex. 19:12). Moses himself could not look upon the face of God and survive the experience. These stories present God as a threat to your life. Stay away unless you are so holy and have so much faith that you can endure God's presence. On this Sunday, God is seen as a great power, a threat, something to be feared. The voice of God today sounds like thunder. It is not the voice of a loving God but the voice of a God demanding obedience: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him!" We hear this voice with fear in our hearts and run for cover: "For who shall endure at the day of his coming, and who shall stand when he appears?"

Of course, this is also St. Valentine's Day, a day when it would be nice to hear something about God being love, when the preacher would like to be able to say something about God's love; perhaps something on the great commandment to love God and love one another. Given the secular calendar, the great temptation is to ignore the Transfiguration scriptures altogether and focus on something that is more amenable to a more loving theme. Unfortunately, this Sunday is supposed to prepare us for Lent, the 40 days of traditional fasting and prayer as we prepare ourselves for Holy Week, for Good Friday passion and finally the miracle of Easter, when the stone is rolled away and the risen Christ reigns for ever and ever. This Wednesday we will contemplate our mortality with ashes on our faces as Lent begins. So, there's nothing to be done I'm afraid. We are going to have to take our spinach and turn our attention to this peculiar story about how we are changed when we come close to God, and how we can have courage as we contemplate the threat that is implicit in our credal statements that claim that "We are not alone!"

Over the centuries the church seems to have taken the view that God's people need to be protected from direct encounters with God by creating priests to be intermediaries between us and God. God's Temple in Jerusalem was God's House – the place where God could be met by human beings and it was designed so that only the most deserving and holy people could get close to God. The outside area of the Temple was the Court of the Gentiles where non-Jews and women were allowed to gather. Only male Jews were allowed to get any closer to God than that. Once admitted into the more exclusive central area of the Temple, only the priests and high officials were allowed to go any further and approach the Holy of Holies at the centre of the Temple itself. And once there, only one person, the High Priest, could enter the Holy of Holies itself, and then only on one day of the year. On that Day, the High Priest would tie a long rope around his waist, one end of which would be held by an assistant who remained outside the most sacred

place. That way, if the High Priest should die in the presence of God inside the Holy of Holies, the assistant could drag his body out of the sacred space without desecrating it.

When Christianity came along we dropped the idea of the Temple, but we kept the idea of the priest as the intermediary or the bridge between God and God's people. It was the priest who prayed to God on behalf of the people, and it was the priest who read the scriptures and taught the people about God. It's an idea that I've never been comfortable with. Many of you have asked me to pray for you, and while I am always honoured and happy to do that, I often wonder if my prayers are any different from anyone else's. I find it hard to believe that the act of being ordained made me any different in the eyes of God than I was before. Hopefully, I'm no further away from God than I was as a layperson, but I'm not sure how much closer to God I am now that the church has laid hands on me and called me out for special service in the church. One of the rallying cries of the Protestant Reformation was "Every Man his own Priest", which we would now modernize to say "Every~~one~~ his own priest". There is no need for an intermediary. We are all alike in the sight of God. No one's prayers are any better or more acceptable to God than another's.

Even with these reforms however, God is still seen by most people as a vaguely threatening presence in our lives. The writer of the Book of Hebrews claims that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:13) and most people believe that of God if they believe in God at all. And so it should be too surprising that most people who believe in God breathe a quiet sigh of relief that close encounters with the Almighty seem to have become a thing of the past, events that are restricted to the scriptures. And if God does not act in the world it is a small step to believing that there is no God at all. The story of the Transfiguration is seen as a myth, a legend that may have a moral to it, but can't be taken seriously as an actual event. God is a long-ago and far-away reality if it is a reality at all for most of us. The churches become irrelevant in times like ours, which leads some of them to insist that every disaster, every hurricane, every earthquake is an Act of God's wrath against the people who die and an acts of God's miraculous love for any survivors. The recent earthquake in Haiti is no exception; a well-known American evangelist has claimed that the earthquake was the result of Haiti's rebellion against slavery in the nineteenth century.

I suppose it is in the interest of the churches to keep God scary and intimidating provided that they can convince their people that they know how to appease such a God, but I'm not sure it's worth the trouble to believe in such a God at all. Under such circumstances we are left with a mean little God that isn't really worthy of worship at all in my view, and we desperately seek another way to imagine the Creator of the universe. Some of us become aware of God's presence in the beauty of nature. I've spoken before of the experience that Vicki, Jamie and I had last summer of looking up at the night sky from the deck of our cottage in New Brunswick, and what an awesome experience that was. Many of us have had life-changing experiences when we felt God's presence close to us. Maybe we felt that our faces were shining then, even if no one else seemed to notice any difference. The more we understand of the universe and our lives in that universe the more awesome the Creator of that universe becomes. But we must never confuse the universe with God, the Creation with the Creator. The stars in the night sky give us a sense of worship for the Creator of that sky, but we do not worship the little points of light burning millions of light years away. We can imagine God's love for us by feeling the love in our families or our churches, but we must always remember that God's love are far deeper, more forgiving and more accepting than anything we will ever experience between human beings. That doesn't mean that human love is useless or pointless, but it does mean that we begin to understand God's love for us by loving one another.

Those of you who are still listening should now realize that I have now reached the point in the sermon where I can begin to speak of Valentine's Day. The One who God recognized as God's Son is the One who teaches us that God is love. The human being whose face and clothing were transformed by God to a

dazzling white on the day of the Transfiguration is one who teaches us that love for God and love for one another are but different sides of the same coin. We can believe in such a human being, who came as close to understanding the nature of God as any human being has ever done. This is the One who spoke of God as Abba which means Daddy. This is the One who teaches us that God loves us more than we can ever imagine being loved.

This is the God that is closer to us than our hands and feet. The God of Moses, the God of Jesus, the God of the mountain top, the God of love. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Amen