

C Transfiguration 3.3.19
Psalm 99; Luke 9:28-43a

Focus Statement: Our powerful and mighty God is in real, human, relationship with us.

In Bible study, Jan does this thing that I love where we'll read a really powerful passage or someone will come up with an insightful insight, and Jan will respond, "wow, that's a wow." Every time I read the Transfiguration story, I find myself also saying, wow, this is a wow. There's just something so otherworldly about this description of Jesus sitting in prayer at the top of a mountain with his three closest disciples when suddenly his is transfigured, transformed, in front of them. The appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. And just in case we missed the reference to Moses, who we learned from the first reading was also transformed by God atop a mountain. So much so that he had to wear a veil over his face when he came down because his face glowed so much. Which, and I have no idea if this is true but it makes me laugh, I wonder if the veil was because they all slept in tents, and Moses' glowing face kept people up at night. But anyway, in case we missed the reference, while Jesus is dazzling away, Moses and Elijah show up too. And Peter, ah Peter, always the 'talk first, think later' one, is like, "Master, this is awesome. Let's build some tents, let's hang out up here!" Luke is quick to point out that Peter said this, "not knowing what he said." And as soon as Peter said this, boom, a thick cloud descended and "they were terrified." Then a voice came from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Then the cloud lifted, leaving only the disciples and the back to normal Jesus, and they all went back down the mountain. But, Luke added, "they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." A part of me is like, what! How could you see Jesus transfigured in front of you, like literally glowing, hanging out with Moses and Elijah, and not say anything! But another part of me is like, how could

you ever put such an experience into words. Astonished silence is maybe the only response to such an incredible experience.

I love Psalm ninety-nine as a pair to this Gospel text, because the poetry of the Psalms is maybe our best chance at putting this kind of grandeur into words. Let me read part of the Psalm again: “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he!”

We’ve got earthquakes, people trembling, exaltation, greatness, awe. We’ve got cherubim. Cherubim, fun fact, is the plural of cherub. And a cherub in scripture is a lion or bull with the wings of an eagle and the face of a human, often holding a flaming sword. This is not a chubby Precious Moments baby with downy wings; these things are terrifying! That’s what we’ve got here seated beside the throne of God, flying bulls or lions with flaming swords. No wonder the earth is quaking, I’d be quaking too.

But then, and if you didn’t catch this don’t worry. I didn’t catch this until I read a really excellent commentary by J. Clinton McCann, but then the Psalm goes very quickly from cosmic to human scale. Verse four: “Mighty God, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.” Justice, equity, righteousness, these are huge concepts yes, but they’re also human concepts. Flying bull-lion, he or she is probably not all that concerned about equity; they’re an angel with a

flaming sword. Equity is about us, equity, righteousness, justice, these are things we long for, things in our worldview, in our scope of understanding.

And then it gets even more personal. This divine being seated on a throne of warrior angels starts calling out people by name. “Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel was also among those who called on his name.” And yeah, yeah, Moses, Aaron, Samuel are heavy hitters in religious lore, but remember, these guys also had some flaws. Samuel first heard God when he was just a boy, and he thought it was his mentor Eli. Moses was afraid to speak, so God gave him Aaron. And Aaron is the one who when Moses was up on the mountain top getting the Ten Commandments and a glowing face, Aaron was back with the Israelites building a golden calf for them to worship. Yes, they’re heroes, but very human heroes. And heroes who, the Psalm goes on, “cried to the Lord, and he answered them.”

“O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them.” Notice the shift there in verse eight. No longer a third-person description, the psalmist gets personal: “O Lord our God, you answered them.” And J. Clinton McCann pointed out that the word the NRSV translated as forgiving is maybe better translated as “bearing” or “carrying.” So this forgiving here, this isn’t “hey, it’s ok, forget about it,” this is the divine being described earlier as seated on a throne of flying bull-lion angels, that same cosmic power, actually taking upon Godself the burden of human sin and brokenness, bearing, carrying that burden for us, taking the load so that we don’t have to. Friends, this is intimate stuff. And remember last week, when I talked about Evelyn and Edna and how sometimes the most

graceful, loving thing we can do for each other is to call each other out, even though it would be way easier to just let it go and look the other way? The second half of verse eight, “you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.” God is in this thing with us. In the trenches, ready to carry our burdens when they need carrying, but willing to go toe-to-toe when what we really need is for someone to not be afraid to call us out on our own mistakes. This is the God whom the Psalmist ends by urging us: “Extol the Lord our God, and worship on God’s holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.” Holiness here is redefined. The holiness of God is not that God is set apart from humanity, distant and cosmic and enthroned upon the cherubim. The holiness of God is profoundly personal, grounded in grace, love, and a deep tenacity to be in relationship with us. This Lord who is king is OUR God, the one who not only calls us by name, but on who’s name we can call, and that same God will answer. That is Our God who is holy.

So back to our Gospel. When we left them, Jesus had just finished being transfigured before them, face changed, clothes dazzling, Moses and Elijah, clouds descending and voices from heaven declaring Jesus, God’s Son, the whole nine yards. And the disciples kept silent and... told no one any of the things they had seen.” Then they came down off the mountain and immediately they are met with a great crowd of people, and a man from the crowd shouted, “Teacher,” and presented to Jesus his only child, a boy so overcome with a demon that he would convulse until he foamed at the mouth, “it mauls him and will scarcely leave him.” And “Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.” And it was then, not after the miracle on the mountain, with Moses, Elijah, dazzling whiteness, changed faces, clouds descending, and voices from heaven, but in the act of Jesus

restoring a boy to health and a father to his son, in that intimate act of healing and restoration, it was in that action that “all were astounded at the greatness of God.”

This, dear people of God, is the Lord our God, the God whom we extol. A God whose greatness is on display in relationship, in the intimate, human holiness grounded not in might and glory, but in something more powerful than that. Our God is a God whose greatness is displayed most clearly in divine grace, suffering love, and the transforming power of relationship. Amen.