

*Dangerous Opportunities*  
Sermon: Last Epiphany/Transfiguration  
February 7, 2016

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Exodus 34:29-35

Psalm 99

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

Our three readings today are actually all a bit dangerous. The first two are dangerous because they can be easily misunderstood when placed side-by-side. And the gospel is dangerous because it points towards a risky proposition.

I spent a good chunk of a whole day this week talking with a rabbi friend about the issues related to the juxtaposition of the Exodus story with the passage from Paul, but that sermon is going to have to wait for another time. But please hear me when I say that it would be dangerous and harmful to assume that Paul meant to denigrate Jewish practice then or now. If anyone wants to talk about the Jewish use of the veil metaphor, please nab me after church.

So, let's look at what might be dangerous about our gospel passage. In this passage from Luke, eight days before this happened, Peter had just recognized Jesus as the Messiah. And in response, Jesus informed the disciples that being God's messiah meant he was going to be tortured and killed, but would rise again. This was the first time they had heard that hard news. I can only imagine the shock and disbelief they experienced when given this information. It simply wouldn't compute.

So what does Jesus do? After 8 days of the disciples shaking their heads in disbelief and most likely arguing with him, Jesus probably said something like, "Ok. I give up. I know this is hard to grasp. Let's go pray about it." So he gathers three of his disciples, goes up a mountain with them, and something pretty wild happens. As Jesus is praying, his whole countenance changes and his clothes are described as dazzling white. As if that weren't enough, then the disciples see Jesus meeting with Moses and Elijah, the pillars of the Jewish tradition who'd be dead for hundreds of years. Moses and Elijah had also had pretty remarkable mountain top encounters with God. We read about Moses' encounter today, which was actually his third such event. The first was at the burning bush. The second was when he climbed the mountain, entered a dense cloud, and received the 10 Commandments orally. And this was third time when he brought down the stone tablets with a brilliantly shiny face to prove it. 500 years after Moses encountered God on a cloud-covered mountain, Elijah was on the same mountain and encountered God, but in his case it was as in a still small voice, not a dense cloud.

So where does that put us today? At the beginning of this season of Epiphany, the magi followed a bright star to the infant Jesus. And here we are on the last Sunday of Epiphany with Jesus becoming the light himself. It's our pinnacle story of light. Epiphany celebrates the fact that we are people who have seen a great light. We should bask in and soak up this brilliant light! But how are we going to respond to experiencing God's glory this Epiphany season? We have seen the great light! So now what?

I see an answer in the seemingly unrelated story that immediately follows the Transfiguration. This is where the danger comes in. In the shadow of the mountain, in the shadow cast by the great light of the Transfiguration, we have the story of another only son. But this only son is possessed by an evil spirit. Now, the disciples can't cure this boy yet

because they still don't fully understand Jesus. They won't have that power until they experience his crucifixion and resurrection. So Jesus heals this boy. And it's Jesus who will heal us of whatever is afflicting our lives.

Lent follows Epiphany because great lights cast big shadows. They go together, the light and the dark. You can't have one without the other. We can't be whole unless we embrace our brokenness, our shadow side. We don't get Easter Sunday without Good Friday. Every one of our bright gifts is accompanied by a dark gift. For every talent we possess, we have an equal Achilles' heel. Paul talks today about looking in a mirror and noticing the shameful things we want to hide. This last Sunday of Epiphany shows us God in all God's glory, but in order to fully take in what that gift means, we are about to have a forty-day opportunity to look at our shadow side. That can feel very dangerous.

Don't be afraid to examine the darkness. The light gives you the ability to see in the darkness. Jesus is with you and won't ever, ever leave you.

I had an experience last month that reminded me of my belief that Jesus is always with me, especially in the darkness. My family and I were in Costa Rica for ten days. Towards the end of the trip, we were scheduled to go white water rafting. I wasn't scared about the rafting, but our daughter Jamie was terrified. So I promised Jamie I would help her get through the experience.

Well, the day we did the Class-IV white water rafting, while our group of about 20 people was getting instructions from the guides, Butch quietly slipped to the rear and informed the head guide that Jamie was a little nervous and would he make sure we got the most understanding and competent guide. Meanwhile, as I was listening to the instructions from the other guide, I started to get more and more nervous. You see, all the directions were based on knowing when to paddle on the left or on the

right. I'm a little embarrassed to admit this to you, but I either have a learning disability, or I was just absent the day in kindergarten when they taught it, because I have trouble identifying my left and right. I know them, but it always takes me a few seconds to get oriented. So what I was hearing was that my survival in these treacherous, churning rapids would depend on my knowing, in the blink of an eye, the difference between left and right. I was about to embark on a jungle rafting tour to death and I had promised to take Jamie with me!

I panicked and told the head guide that I just wasn't going to be able to go. Needless to say, Jamie said she wouldn't go if I didn't go. The guide shook his head and dismissed me at first saying I would be fine. I said, "no, no, no, you don't understand, I don't know my left and right, so it simply isn't going to be possible. Jamie and I will wait with the driver." This kind guide then paused and looked me in the eye and said, "I've been guiding on this river for over 30 years. I promise you, I will get you to the other end safely. Trust me. I will sit next to you and I will guide you. Just listen to my voice." Jamie looked at me, I looked at the guide, and after a few deep breaths, I finally agreed to go.

As we went through crazy-big rapids where there was no time to think and moments when I didn't know which way was forward, I focused on the guide's voice. I messed up my paddling multiple times, but we made it through the rough waters and Jamie and I were even smiling by the end. That guide reminded me of what Jesus does for us every day, especially when we have to face our fears or weaknesses. Jesus, the light of the world, is right there by our side, and will give us what we need to peer into the darkness. If we listen for and focus on Jesus' voice, trusting him, we can go where we don't think it's possible.

That's our dangerous invitation this last Sunday in Epiphany. Go on a pilgrimage this Lent. Have the courage and curiosity to examine

something in your life that's difficult or painful or a distraction from bringing you closer to God. If you want to take that journey in community, come to the Wednesday night soup suppers, or make time for the Thursday morning contemplative prayer group, or consider participating in the grief group.

Alternatively, if you think your invitation to examine some hard truths would be better served in a more private setting where you can hear the still small voice like Elijah, keep a prayer journal this Lent. Or, this might be the time in your life when you finally decide to make that appointment with a therapist. Or maybe you'd like to meet with a Spiritual Director (I'm happy to make a referral for you). Some people like to make a confession during Lent; Malcolm and I are available for this. And remember, you can always meet for prayer and pastoral counseling with me or Malcolm, Richard, Zoila, or Dorothy.

We call today's gospel passage the Transfiguration. Don't think it's just about Jesus being transfigured. It's also about our own transfiguration, our own potential transformation. You have been marked as Christ's own forever and sealed by the Holy Spirit. When you were baptized, you should have also been given a candle to represent the light of Christ. Take hold of that light and go boldly into this next season of shadows and introspection and risk being radically changed by your relationship with God.

*Amen.*