

GOING ON FAITHBOOK

Sermon, March 3, 2019

Transfiguration Sunday

Texts: Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36, II Peter 1:16-19

Peter writes in our Epistle reading with which we opened worship. *"We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!'"* Peter writes, "We are eyewitnesses of the majesty of Jesus Christ," and then specifically refers to the event recorded in our Gospel reading. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus' **face** changed, other accounts tell us it "shone like the sun," they saw His face like they never saw it before. His clothes "became as white as lightning," (*other Gospel accounts have it "as white as the light"*) and Moses and Elijah appeared there with Him, and we are told in Luke's account that the three "luminaries" were talking about what will be happening in the days ahead. (*In a way, this scene is a great pictorial summary of the whole Bible ... Moses representing the Law, Elijah representing the Prophets, conversing with Jesus in Whom and by Whom the Law and the Prophets find their fulfillment ... but that's another much longer sermon*). And then a cloud enveloped the disciples, and God's voice sounded *from the cloud* and said, *"This is my Son. Listen to Him!"*

In our lesson from the Old Testament, Moses has been on Mount Sinai having "Face Time" with God; he has been in the presence of God where he has been given the Ten Commandments, the *"two tablets of the Testimony."* We are told that when Moses descended from the mountain *"... with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD."* After spending time in the presence of God, the face of Moses changed; we are told his face was so aglow with the reflected glory of God that his older brother Aaron and all the rest of the Israelites were afraid of him and would not draw near; Moses had to call to them and coax them to come to him. After Moses gave them the commands he had just received from God, he then put a veil over his face to cover the dazzling brilliance. And the text concludes by telling us that whenever Moses entered God's presence, he removed the veil. Then he would come out to tell the Israelites what had been commanded, face aglow with the reflected glory and authority of God, and you can be sure they listened. (*There's another sermon in itself here, but when someone spends time in the presence of God, it's going to show in that person's face. How and when you spend your time, for better or worse, WILL show in your face, no matter how you might try to cover or "veil" it.*)

I couldn't help but think of the relatively modern phenomena of Facebook as I read these face changing accounts (*I say "relatively" modern, because during the Time With The Children I was informed that Facebook was old; Instagram is the rage these days.*) As someone put it, we're increasingly living in a TGIF social world ... no, not a "Thank **G**oodness **I**t's **F**riday" world, but a **T**witter/**G**oogle/**I**nstagram/**F**acebook world. For better or worse, social media has opened up a whole new realm of communication and human interaction. I was a Facebook holdout, but I finally got involved on Facebook three Thanksgivings ago, when my children convinced me to get an account after our Thanksgiving meal ... less than four minutes, a dear friend from my hometown, someone I've known over fifty years, "friended" me ... and I was hooked. Within days I was in touch with innumerable old friends, some of whom I had not seen for decades; it really was a remarkable experience for me. I quickly discovered, however, like all technology, it has its plus and negative sides ... it can be a tremendous time waster, but it also can be a remarkably helpful means of communication. As most of you know, on Facebook we can create the public profile of ourselves we want others to see, the public face we want to put forward. We can edit out aspects of our lives that might be embarrassing, uncomplimentary, or just TMI (*"too much information"*). We can post only the most flattering photographs of ourselves. I like the story of the man who said to the photographer, *"I hope your camera will do me justice."* He replied, *"Sir, you don't need justice, you need mercy."* Or, the old saying, *"If you look like your passport picture, you need the vacation."* Well, on Facebook, we can put our best face forward ... more than that, we can put our *better* than best face forward ... we can fudge facts or even write complete fiction in our profiles, giving ourselves sort of a virtual facelift, putting more than our best face forward ... but be careful; the truth always finds its way out.

As mentioned in the Time With the Children, the Bible might be thought of as God's Facebook (*or, perhaps more accurately, FAITHbook*) profile ... it's pages reveal God to us. Read it, spend time looking into the divine "posts" that tell you of God's activities, God's likes, His passions, His interests, what He has done and is doing. Send a "friend" request to God in prayer asking Him to reveal more of His "profile" to you ... more accurately, respond to God's friend request to you, for He has already expressed His "friend request" to us in that He loved us so much He sent His only Son into this world, but we have to respond and accept His expressed invitation in Jesus Christ. Ask Him to help you to better understand His timeline, His posts. Spend time on Faith Book; it'll be time well spent.

Just as a bit of an aside, I'd like to suggest a few rules of thumb for social media: Be careful about what you post, don't say anything you wouldn't say in a face to face encounter with another, exercise the Facebook version of the Golden Rule ... don't post about others what you wouldn't want them to post about you ... as in all things, let

love be your prime motivation. Be loving, be encouraging, be kind, be thoughtful; the relative “protection” of a computer screen sometimes fosters rather nasty and/or uncivil and/or unkind behavior. Things are posted that would never be said face-to-face to flesh and blood people. There have been and continue to be too many cases where hazing and outright cruelty have literally and figuratively de-faced Facebook pages, which also defaces the lives of those with Facebook accounts. And don’t let virtual communication become a substitute for face to face encounter. We need to have face time. Making “face-time” with friends, family, and neighbors takes away the electronic filters that hide and obscure. It is face time that makes us vulnerable, that makes us real, that makes us more polite, that makes us more human.

The following was edited out on the spot due to time constraints: “I like how one author rather concisely defined ‘manners’ – “At their most fundamental level, manners amount to an acknowledgement that other humans exist.”¹ And we act accordingly, with loving respect of, and mannerly consideration for, their existence. We tend to have better manners when we are face to face with people.

As mentioned earlier, Peter reiterates emphatically, “We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with Him on the sacred mountain.” Peter writes this letter knowing that his time on earth was short and that his readers in Rome were about to face many dark difficulties and very real dangers in the persecution to come. In the midst of this reality, Peter reminds them, our faith in Jesus Christ is not grounded on myths or clever stories; it’s *real!* You can be certain of that! Our faith is based on the sure and certain and factual and historical revelation from God. And Peter refers specifically to this scene from the Gospels, the Transfiguration, which seems to have been a defining moment for these three disciples. I’m sure the vivid memory of this experience kept them going through some very dark times. In this moment on the Mount, Jesus confirmed Peter’s confession made eight days earlier, thus erasing all remaining doubt as to who He might be. He also confirmed He would have to go by way of the Cross, that there will be betrayal and rejection and suffering and death when they go back down the mountain and head on to Jerusalem, but on the other side of all this He would be raised in eternal life and glory. Yes, He was going to suffer; but Yes, all would be well. I think Jesus took Peter and James and John up onto the mountain with Him because He wanted to give them something to remember and to hold onto when times got tough.

And, this is almost another sermon, things will always get tough in the rough and tumble of living in a fallen world ... there will be betrayals, there will be sufferings, there will be disappointments and failings. A quote I read in preparation for our Ash Wednesday service last year sums it up well, “*There is no Eden without a serpent.*” There’s always going to be something causing things to go wrong, no matter how “perfect” the paradise on earth may seem. But on that mountain these disciples are given a glimpse of ultimate Face Time with Jesus in real time; they are given a glimpse into how it will all turn out in glory. Jesus wanted to assure them He knew what He was doing in the very real difficulties and trials and sufferings to come. Moses and Elijah are there to confirm it. By being given this intense experience they can now see that no matter what difficulties they will face, the story will turn out well. Another quick point I’ve made on past Transfiguration Sundays: Glorious as the transfiguration experience was, I think it’s significant to note that God didn’t speak at all during it; He spoke *afterwards*. He spoke from the cloudy haze which followed the experience, the cloud which enveloped and overshadowed the amazed, confused, dazed disciples. It was in the *cloud* the disciples heard the voice of God. While they were covered in cloud, disorientated, unable to see clearly, God spoke to them and told them to “*LISTEN TO JESUS.*” The cloudy times is where God is encountered. That is where genuine faith takes root. That is where the intensity of previous religious “mountaintop” experience takes on real meaning ... and where we learn, really learn, to listen to Jesus.

You know, when Peter witnessed this Transfiguration, he wanted to set up dwellings and stay there. It seems he just wanted to dwell in perpetual spiritual clarity. But he could not do so. Jesus wouldn’t let him. He had to go back down the mountain. They all had to go back down the mountain, back to the valleys and plains of life and work. But they descended inspired with a quiet knowledge and utter confidence in their hearts that the Hope is real. Spiritual experiences can and do come to us. Many, if not all of us, have experienced defining moments when we sense the very presence of God, when we “see” the glory of God. Wonderful and joyful as these moments are, they do not last, do they? We’d love to hang onto them, we’d love to dwell in that perpetual spiritual clarity, but Jesus won’t let us, either. The transience of these moments is not always our fault. The fleeting nature of the highs of joyful experience are not some kind of sign of lack of faith. It is the pattern of Transfiguration: a glimpse of glory ... followed by a return to the cloudy paths of discipleship. God gives us a taste of what IS; then God says, “**Enjoy this. Now go home. Get back to work. And keep listening to Jesus**”

I always hope you receive a blessing from our worship services, that the music and the prayers and the fellowship bring you closer to God than you have ever been before, that you may get a glimpse of glory and experience a little Face Time with the Almighty in His community of friends. But no offense, I don’t want you to stay here. There are people who need your love and your witness of faith as you listen to and follow Jesus; they need to know the vision of Christ you hopefully have experienced here ... as part of God’s FaithBook community.

¹ From an insightful, albeit at times brutal, article by Mark Brennan in the December 2018 issue of *Chronicles Magazine*. It is behind a pay wall at <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/2018/December/43/12/magazine/article/10845836>