



Sunday, March 3, 2019

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

The COURAGE to Begin

Luke 9:28-36 – Transfiguration Sunday

INTRODUCTION:

If we can think of the liturgical year the way we think of episodic TV seasons, then today we come to the season finale of Epiphany. You may remember that “epiphany” means; to “show forth”, to “reveal”. For the last 7 weeks we have seen how Jesus is “shown forth” as a radical prophet and “revealed” as a profound spiritual teacher, who often uses astounding miracles as object lessons. Most importantly, the greatest “epiphany” of all is that Jesus is presented as God’s chosen one, God’s beloved child. The promised Messiah. And today’s season finale of “Epiphany” does not disappoint.

Just before this remarkable “transfiguration” episode occurred, Jesus spoke about how he must suffer and die prior to his resurrection. Not only that, but he told his disciples that **anyone** who wishes to follow him must be **equally** willing to “deny themselves and take up the cross.” (Luke 9:23) It leaves you wondering if this really is the “good news of the Gospel.”

Maybe that is why we read this astonishing story on the last Sunday of Epiphany. Just before we descend with Jesus on the Lenten journey through the shadowed valley of death, we are bathed in transcendent Transfiguration light. Here we get a glimpse of the mystical and mysterious place that lies beyond the far side of the valley.

After clearly revealing the dark path that we all must walk, we are reassured of a glorious outcome. For just a moment, the veil that separates the temporal and eternal realities is set aside.

May God give us ears to hear Luke’s account of the Transfiguration, found in Chapter 9 verses 28 through 36.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

Now about eight days after these sayings,  
Jesus took with him Peter and John and James,  
and went up on the mountain to pray.  
And while he was praying,  
the appearance of his face changed,  
and his clothes became dazzling white.

Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they *saw* his glory and the two men who stood with him.

Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus,

“Master, it is good for us to be here;  
let us make three dwellings,  
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—

not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this,  
a cloud came and overshadowed them;  
and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.

Then from the cloud came a voice that said,

*“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”*

When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone.

And they kept silent  
and in those days  
told no one any of the things they had seen.

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The Word of God leading us to be a people of God...

I kept silent in those days. I could not bring myself to tell even my closest friends. I had encountered a spiritual epiphany. Somehow, I knew deep within me that this Gospel that I read was true and I was undeniably compelled to follow in the way of Jesus. Surely if I told them my story, what I had seen and heard, they would think I had gone mad. I was a “Jesus Freak”. “He found religion” they’d say and treat me like a lunatic or a leper. So, you keep silent in those days and tell no one any of the things you have seen.

It works the other way too. Who wants to hear about your suffering or grief? Again, the inner monologue spins webs of justification. “Everyone is already carrying enough of their own problems. What makes your trouble so special that

you have to bring everyone down with you? What if they see me as a failure, a looser who brought this on himself?" So, you hold the secret out of shame. You have a reputation to uphold and preserve. Your integrity and self-worth are at stake. So, you resist confessing that you too are vulnerable to cancer. You too are struggling with clinical depression. You too have been caught by addiction. You too are unsuccessfully managing a loved one suffering the debilitating ravage of mental illness. You too cannot find your way through the unresolved grief, so you keep silent in those days and tell no one.

It is a heavy burden to carry. Maybe this is why Jesus took Peter, John and James up on the mountain with him to pray that day. In the past he always went alone, but this day he brought them along. Maybe Jesus was ready to share the joy and sorrow that he'd been holding close all these years. Maybe he thought that they were ready to receive the truth.

It's strange to think about but just prior to this mystical transfiguration Jesus went off big time. He orders and commands them not to tell anyone that, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Then he said to them all, "If any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."¹

Maybe it's me, but Jesus sounds kind of off here. All of a sudden, he's blurting out the whole program and it sounds...well...kind of insane. Or, maybe he is lying in an attempt to lure them into backing his delusion, or the only other possibility is that he is telling the truth. So, eight days later he takes them up the mountain to see for themselves and they get an eyeful! They know for sure he is telling the truth and from the top of that mountain they can see that Jesus is about to head directly into the city below. In Jerusalem Jesus will most certainly be arrested for the things he's been saying. He will no doubt be beaten and, in all likelihood, executed. This is what the Romans did to those who caused trouble and stirred up the crowds. It's no wonder they kept silent.

¹ Luke 3:21-17

Eventually these men and women who followed Jesus and were eye witnesses to his life, death and resurrection found the courage to tell the story. They overcame their fear of speaking this amazing story of a Love that is so powerful that it overcomes even death. And, as a result, this is our story today.

This Wednesday we begin to remember this story once again. We call it Lent. Six weeks of deeply examining who we are and what our lives are truly about. Lent is a reflective time to assess our relationship with God and one another. A time to risk speaking our truth to one another and breaking the silence that holds us hostage. It is a time to risk giving up your life to gain it.

This Wednesday we find the courage to begin by confessing our vulnerability. From ashes we have come and to ashes we will return. We begin in admitting our weakness. Who can argue that we are all powerless over death? From this humble beginning, many of us will gather each week in small groups to talk about our fears and anxieties in the hope that in speaking our truth we will discover an unusual courage. Beginning next Sunday, and throughout Lent, Jean and I will focus our worship and sermons to introduce the specific aspect of courage that will be discussed in the small groups. We will explore:

- The Courage to Seek the Truth
- The Courage to Face Uncertainty
- The Courage to Change Course
- The Courage to Take Action
- And finally, The Courage to Trust

Also, each Wednesday evening during Lent we will open the sanctuary from 6:30 to 7pm for contemplative prayer. Vickie Wagner will usher us into a time of contemplative silence, reflection and centering prayer through gentle music from the pipe organ. You can light a candle, pray or simply sit in the stillness, peace and presence of God.

As we begin our descent into Lent and follow Jesus to the cross, let us also remember our own mountain top experience. Let us remember that as we too enter into the shadows of suffering in our own lives that the story never ends there. The shadows always give way to the translucent light and we too are transformed and transfigured into new, abundant life. The Lenten path is not for the faint of heart, and according to Jesus, this is the only way through. The path of descent is the path of transformation.

Luke tells us that they were terrified as they entered the cloud on top of that mountain, but that is when they heard a voice of assurance and promise. "*This is*

my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Together, let us find the courage to simply begin. Let us listen to the one who told us and showed us that the only way to truly evolve and emerge into a radiant new life, is through the dry ashes of suffering and sorrow. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear. May God fill us with the courage to descend with him and risk our very lives so that we might gain the pearl of great value, a renewed, authentic and vibrant intimacy with the God who also calls you, beloved.

It seems entirely appropriate and right that we begin with the spiritual nourishment offered in the sacrament of Communion. Here is where we find our strength in union and solidarity with Jesus and one another. At this sacred table we will receive just enough courage to begin.