

Sermon for 19 February 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Transfiguration Sunday

Scriptures: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99 (UMH 819); 2 Peter 1:16-21 ; Matthew 17:1-9

“Parallels”

Like the Sunday before Advent, today attempts to sum up and define our Christian story.

What have we been doing since our last big moment with Jesus? That was soon after Christmas and New Year's... remember? Then we concluded with the story of the Wise Men We called it Epiphany: the revelation, the appearing, of leaders from all over the world to acknowledge God's point in Jesus.

Now, on the last Sunday before Lent, we look back to all those ordinary Sundays after the Epiphany and try to sum up with a parallel mountaintop experience. We use Hebrew stories to explain what Jesus means to us.

And, just like on Christ the King Sunday before Advent began, we say, “Get ready. We’re going on retreat. This is about exercise and discipline. These next Sundays, and the weekdays in between, are drawn-out examples of how we how we expect, how we try, to live every day, all year ‘round. All that “Ordinary time” between Trinity Sunday last June, and Christ the King Sunday, last fall, we tried to apply what we’d studied and promised in Lent, before the grand celebration of Easter and Pentecost. Now, in the shorter Ordinary Time between Epiphany and this Transfiguration Sunday, we say we need repeated practice in self-discipline and group awareness training, so light a candle. As we tell our homebound attendees every Sunday, “Do something that honestly and seriously pays attention to this life-and-death business we’re practicing. This is how life is to be lived. Let us help each other march with Jesus.”

So here goes. Last Sunday I quoted from two books I’m reading to make the point that life is about facing justice issues in our time. One book, called “No More Police,” spoke of what we hear every day. Call it police brutality, or guns, or mental health services, or whatever hits not with you. That’s our job, right now. The other book, called “On Gold Mountain,” speaks of one Chinese-American extended family over the past hundred and fifty-some years in California and Canton and other cities, which illustrates that this isn’t just a Black and white matter, but a racial matter, this justice thing, that’s coming on stronger than ever before in our country as well as world-wide, and Jesus is in it from top to bottom, sexually and economically and love-your-neighbor-as-yourself-wise NOW, so work on it.

What gets me excited is the great honor and cheerfulness of this parallelism I’m describing today. Scripture, and tradition, give us awesome techniques and stories. So, let’s work on spacing our attention so it can bear fruit. Just like our literal breathing and dieting and TV-watching and exercising, our religious calendar can be expanded and bring more life. Right now, for example, it’s exciting to see that an organization we’ve known as BUILD, started by church leaders, is proposing doing something about the abandoned houses that blight Baltimore City. Then we’ve got the Republicans scrambling to compete over the Presidency.

Then there's a new Governor who actually goes to Annapolis to talk with state legislators about the budget ...

I'm not getting off the subject of parallels, I'm illustrating what counts. The hardest thing, for this time of ours, is using our personal time inspirationally; not beating up on ourselves for what we haven't done, but seeing Just like Moses told the Israelites and the disciples heard a voice describing Jesus --- seeing in our hearts and believing with our daily schedules that this is a time for rejuvenation like none other in history, and please God we're here until we're not, so help us do some good and space ourselves to rest, and sometimes even to give thanks. Because that's what it's all about.

God is just waiting to bring beauty this spring. It will parallel what we remember ... but this one ... starting with this Ash Wednesday ... will be fresh ... The harsh words, the weak knees, that we know all about are just shadows. Like Moses, and like the disciples what's hidden will be revealed, and our love in action will be stronger than anything that holds us back.

One touch-point that occurred last Sunday was the rumor that there would be a Black national anthem sung at the Superbowl. I didn't watch or hear of the outcome of that, but I've heard James Weldon Johnson's beautiful poem, which is in our hymnal, referred to as that. Open your hymnals now and look at the words of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," found on page 519. Just as the great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, who resisted Hitler courageously in Germany, when asked what he believed, replied with "Jesus Loves Me," so it is surely appropriate for those Blacks who feel led to do so to parallel "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and "The Star Spangled Banner" with Johnson's beautiful and brave poetry about the Black American experience. This is our moment, in this country: A time of openly accepting the parallel stories of citizenship among people of different nationalities and so-called races among us. No Congressional declaration can simplify the matter by declaring only one anthem. We are many, from start to finish, and our roots will continue to bear multiple shoots in every part of our politics, our industry, our conservation, our education.

As a particular challenge to Bethesda this year, isn't it about time we make something of our 100th anniversary? Whether we remain a separate congregation, or link in some way with others in a cooperative parish, our heritage is an opportunity to savor and build upon..

The parallels are endless as we look at our lives The times sorrow has given way to new understanding and new productivity; the way life and death are always interwoven; the fact that even faults and yes, crimes, give way to rebuilding and advancement...

So, let us climb over this newest boundary between Ordinary Time and Lent; make it work for us like any good discipline; and prepare us for the celebration of Easter and Pentecost that will surely follow.... Examine, savor, exercise the love of God through the Spirit in the body of Christ Jesus, in whose name we say, Amen.