

Weekly Reading – Monday, February 8, 2010

We're looking here at the texts for Sunday, February 14, 2010, which is both the last Sunday in Epiphany (Ash Wednesday is February 17) and also Valentine's Day. Preachers please don't do Valentine's Day. Acknowledge it. Wish everyone a happy one, but remember you work for Jesus not for Hallmark. Then deal with one or more of these powerful texts with the Transfiguration theme. Of course you can, if you just have to, go from speaking of human love to God's love, but go easy on the theological candy.

Exodus 34: 29 - 35

Moses of shining, radiant face. After being with God on Mount Sinai and getting a fresh set of the Ten Commandments, Moses returns to the people, his face radiant with the reflected glory of God. This is frightening to the Hebrews. Just so, the experience of God's presence is both wonderful and awful. It is what we want and what we don't want. We don't seem to do awful or awe-ful much anymore in the church. Everything has been cut to size. Services begin with a cheery "Good Morning!" We are so often assured that God loves us, that God is very close, that God is friendly that we have little sense of the distance between us, between our sinful selves and a holy God. Sometimes a sense of sin is a great gift. And, to paraphrase Scripture, to fall into the hands of the living God is a frightening thing. Is there a need to redress the balance between the immanence and transcendence of God, to recover a sense of the "Otherness" of God. We speak and hear today of our problems with "the other," meaning the person or category of persons who are strange, upon whom we project our own stuff, our own shadow. I wonder, if God were more a Holy Other to us perhaps we might discover more in common with our fellow, needy, sinful human beings?

II Corinthians 3: 12 - 4: 2

This text begins with the image of the veil from the previous one, seeing the veil as human resistance to the full presence of God and to full knowledge of the gospel. So, if there is a place for a sense of the distance between sinful humanity and a holy God (see my comments on the last lesson), there is also the promise of entry into the knowledge and presence of God by the grace of Jesus Christ. What kind of veils keep us from knowing God? Sometimes professionalism is a veil, meaning only clergy can know or speak of sacred things. Related to that is that people in the churches have long been discouraged from speaking with conviction and modesty of their own experience of the power and presence of God or of the grace of Christ. So then "our testimony is veiled." Friend and colleague Lillian Daniel notes the way we in the United Church of Christ speak boldly with regard to matters of social justice and social policy (that's good) but go mute when it comes to speaking of God, thus veiling our testimony to a world that longs to hear God's story, God's news, God's grace. Lillian notes an odd thing: often we seem unconcerned about "offense" when speaking on social/ ethical issues, but when it comes to sharing faith we say, "Oh I couldn't do that, I wouldn't want to offend anyone."

Luke 9: 28 - 36 (37 - 43)

As is customary, we have the story of the Transfiguration on this last Sunday before Lent, a moment of radiance before our descent into the valley of the 40 days. And from the Gospel of the Year, Luke. It's usually fruitful to compare the version before us, Luke in this case, with those of Mark and Matthew. The differences will be clues to Luke's accents and points. Common to all three accounts of the Transfiguration is Peter's desire to capture the moment, to build booths for the three, Jesus, Moses and Elijah. But, as seems usual with we poor disciples, Peter is missing the point. It's not to hit freeze frame but to listen deeply, to "listen to him." That's harder than we may think, to listen to Jesus. Prayer, we might think of, as the risky attempt to let God speak, because when God speaks to us it will put some of our cherished ways and self-understandings at risk. One might also take this text as an invitation to preach the Christ kerygma, that is Christ is Lord, in contrast to the Jesus kerygma, stories about Jesus and what a good fellow he was. The lectionary gives the option of adding the follow up story of the boy who is possessed by a demon and the disciples who fail to free him. Jesus is not happy (with the disciples) but does the exorcism himself. A classic sermon on these two stories is, "We cannot remain on the mountaintop of glory, we must return to the valley of service." Well, that's okay, but not only is that awfully predictable, but I always wonder "Have we been to the mountain?" Have we stood in the presence of the Holy God, of Christ who is Lord? Too much of contemporary Christology does reduce Jesus to only an ethical example and loses the sense of the reigning Lord and Savior.