

Revealed

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. This third season of the Church year, following Advent and Christmas, has a variable number of weeks each year, depending on the timing of Easter, which determines the beginning of the six week season of Lent and, since Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent on February 14 this year, Epiphany must perforce come to an end. If you grew up in the Lutheran or Methodist tradition or in another congregation that followed the Revised Common Lectionary, you might remember that the last Sunday of Epiphany is always marked with one of the Gospel stories of the Transfiguration. But if you grew up Catholic or Anglican, you got a second shot at those stories on or around August 6, which those traditions mark as the Feast of the Transfiguration. Why the difference in timing? Well, in 1456, Pope Calixtus III announced that Transfiguration would henceforth be celebrated on August 6 to mark the victory of “Christian” forces over invading Muslim Turks at the siege of Belgrade. I’m pretty dubious about using a celebration of an event in the life of Jesus to commemorate a military victory, so we’ll join our brothers and sisters in those less bellicose traditions and celebrate Transfiguration today.

That being said, of course, you may be wondering what any of this has to do with the passage I just read from the Gospel According to John. Was anybody wondering about that? Well, I’m so glad you asked... As we move from Epiphany to Lent, I’m continuing to follow the proposed “Year D” lectionary proposed by Timothy Matthew Slemmons. Rev. Dr. Slemmons has based this work in large part on the desire to include more of the Bible in a regular set of readings not covered by the traditional years A, B, and C in the Revised Common Lectionary. The orphaned passage he has chosen for this Sunday is the one I just read.

At first glance, John 4:43-54 seems to have precious little in common with the well-known story of Jesus taking Peter, John, and James up a mountain where they see his clothes become dazzling white and witness him in conversation with Moses and Elijah, those great representatives of God’s Law and God’s prophets. They also hear a voice from the heavens proclaiming, “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.” If we remember that the word “Epiphany” refers to the way in which a god becomes visible or manifest to the people and that Christians adopted the word to refer to how Jesus revealed his divine nature, the story of the Transfiguration is an obvious capper for the season of Epiphany each year. But what about this story?

My thought this morning is that this story of miraculous healing also tells us of some very important ways in which Jesus showed himself as the truest self-revelation of God. We see this in the power he displays, of course, but we also see it in the way in which he manifests God’s own unconditional love for all of God’s children. And with this specific healing, Jesus also shows himself as a worthy heir in the tradition of Elijah and of God Godself in a way which leads me back to a question which some of you will know haunts me – isn’t there a better way for us to talk about our salvation through Christ than a resort to the relatively new-fangled theory that Jesus had to die a terrible death to satisfy a vengeful and angry God?

Let’s begin with the most obvious connection between our story this morning and the better known story of the Transfiguration. As Dr. Slemmons himself says in his “Year D” book, the answer is to be found “in terms of awe, wonder, and authority.” In the vast majority of our Biblical stories of Jesus performing a miraculous healing, there is physical action on the part of the wandering teacher from Nazareth. There is a touch, an imposition of mud, a pulling up from

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a sick bed. In this way, Jesus fit the expected mold, in first century Judea and Galilee, of the other healers that the people had seen. But in this story, Jesus heals with a word and at a distance. This, in and of itself, would have been cause for wonderment. Such power would have set him apart from all those other healers and witnesses would have been impressed, both at the confidence with which Jesus announced the healing and, had they followed the relieved father to hear the news of his son's restored health, with the healing itself. John says that the father "himself believed, along with his whole household." We can picture the father falling to his knees to praise God, much as Peter, John, and James did on the mountaintop. Word about this mighty act of healing must have spread, producing similar reactions in many of those who heard about it.

As Slemmons points out, the connection with the mountain-top scene is not just the awe and wonder of the witnesses to these two great events but also the way in which Jesus' authority as the Beloved Son of God is displayed. In the Transfiguration story, the disciples hear the voice of God Godself proclaiming Jesus' special status. But in this story of healing, it is the voice of Jesus himself that is heard. For Jesus, the healing Son of God, no physical activity is needed to affect miraculous action. He need only speak just as his Father brought the worlds into being with a Word. The power and authority of Jesus is on full display here, just as it was atop Mount Tabor as he became too bright to see.

As I mentioned earlier, I also find this story a revelation of the divine nature of Jesus worthy of standing in for the Transfiguration because of the way in which it shows Jesus acting out of the unconditional love of God for all persons. As Jesus is recorded as saying in the Gospel According to Matthew, "Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, do good to those that hate you..." It's worth noting that the man who comes to ask for the healing of his son is, according to the NRSV and several other modern translations, "a royal official." To be a royal official in Galilee meant being an employee or adherent of Herod. This is Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea under Roman sufferance from roughly 4 BCE until AD 39. A weaker version of his father, Herod the Great, Herod Antipas felt himself no more constrained by the laws of God or the opinion of Man than did his father. He put aside his first wife, causing a later war with her father the King of Nabataea, and married his brother's widow who was also his half-sister. When John the Baptist excoriated him publicly for this action, he had John arrested, even though the religious authorities had not dared to move against him due to public opinion, and eventually, due to the conniving of his wife, beheaded him.

Now, Herod was no more friend to Jesus than he had been to his cousin and baptizer. In the Gospel According to Luke, we find the story of the time that a group of Pharisees came to Jesus to warn him that Herod was plotting against him. "At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'" Clearly, Jesus was no particular friend to Herod, either. He certainly wasn't afraid to call him "fox." In our culture, that word carries certain connotations. We admire foxes for their craftiness and their beauty. To be "as sly as a fox" or "crazy like a fox" can be considered positive attributes and which of us who remembers the 70s didn't want to be considered "foxy"? But there was probably none of

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that underlying positive in what Jesus said. In rabbinical literature, the word fox is often used as a term of contempt. Randall Buth's researches, particularly into the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, suggest that Jesus "was commenting on Herod's ineptitude... pedigree, moral stature and leadership." Buth recommends that we substitute for the word "fox" words like "poser" or "clown" or, keeping it in the animal kingdom, "weasel."

So, what did it take for that "royal official" to come to Jesus? He must have known his boss would not be pleased if it got back to Herod. Did he expect Jesus to reject his plea, based on his position? Did he think Jesus would say, "Renounce Herod Antipas and I'll cure your son?" Jesus, of course, did neither of these things. His comment, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe," is a pretty mild rebuke and may have been as much to the crowd as to the desperate father. John writes, "Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.'" Jesus shows in this story not only power and authority but great mercy and grace as well. We can only wonder what part this Herodian official, blessed with the life of his son, had in the subsequent conflict between Herod and Jesus. Did he speak up for the one who had healed his boy? Did he dare to oppose Herod? Or was he too afraid, too careful for his own life and position, too focused on the place of his family to publically identify with the one in whom he had believed?

If Jesus' healing of the son of the Herodian official manifests God's love for all, it also puts him squarely in a great Biblical tradition of the healing or saving of sons. As I considered this passage for this Transfiguration Sunday, I could not help but think of the story of Elijah and the widow's son. Elijah, one of the two Old Testament figures seen by the disciples with Jesus on the mountain top, healed in a more conventional way but the parallels seem inescapable. The story is in the 17th chapter of the First Book of the Kings. To survive a drought and famine, Elijah has been told by God to go the town of Zarephath, "which belongs to Sidon;" in other words, a gentile town. There he is taken in by a widow and, for as long as Elijah stays with her, her tiny store of oil and flour is miraculously replenished. Then, her only son falls ill: "his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" But he said to her, "Give me your son." He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."'"

It's worth noting again the similarities and differences between the two stories. Like Jesus, many years later, Elijah heals the son of someone who should be considered an enemy, or at least beneath his notice. Unlike Jesus, Elijah has to call out to God in appeal and perform what sounds suspiciously like CPR to affect the child's healing. But more to my current point, both Jesus and Elijah, by saving their petitioners' sons, have participated in an act of Divine mercy which has far reaching implications. Not only would these children have been loved and cherished by their parents but for both families these sons represented the future of the family

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and their own viability. In a day with no pensions or Social Security, a parent too old to work and particularly a widow would have been reliant on the filial care of their only son. And there is something more...

I do not have time this morning, nor did I have time this week, to unpack all of the theological implications of the story of Abraham and the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac. But if nothing else, the abrupt aural message from Yahweh and appearance of a sacrificial ram are the initial Biblical story in a series in which God acts to save a special son. Do you remember? “When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”

Now, I know it may seem as if I’m straying pretty far afield but as I said to begin with this repeated motif in our Scriptures continues to whisper in my ear. The God of Abraham and Isaac, the God of Elijah and the widow’s son, the Father of Jesus and God of the Herodian official is a God who is concerned for the sons and daughters of God’s people. How is it, then, that we can so blithely assume that the bloody and torturous death of God’s own Son was God’s only solution to the problem of God’s own insulted honor? This is, in effect, the Substitutionary Theory of the Atonement, first proposed by Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, nearly 1100 years after Jesus died and was resurrected, and further refined and promoted by John Calvin over 400 years later. It has subsequently been enshrined by most Protestant believers as “THE” explanation for the work of the Cross.

This is not the time for an extensive argument about what may seem to some of you to be an area of interest restricted only to preachers and scholars. Maybe I’ll spend some time during my Sabbatical working up a series of lessons for Sunday School or Soup, Salad, and Soul on this subject. Suffice it to say that I do not recognize in the angry picture of God presented by Calvin and his followers the Loving Creator that I have encountered in the Scriptures. Nor can I believe that the repeated story of God’s messenger, be it angel, prophet, or Messiah, acting to save a son doesn’t tell us something important about the God who saves. I would put the old, vengeful images of God behind us, speaking not of God demanding satisfaction but rather of God ultimately displaying that God’s power is greater than that of death. Let us proclaim that Jesus suffered and bled and died and then was raised to show us that we *are* free from our sins, not in some grotesque payment for them. Let us teach that all of the Jesus story, from his incarnation to his continued spiritual presence among us, shows us the way to life and not simply his death. Let us take to heart the lessons of this alternate Transfiguration tale and be transformed ourselves into children of God who trust as Jesus and Elijah and Moses trusted, who love in the way God loves and would have us love – without boundaries or conditions – and who seek to heal insofar as we can the myriad hurts and sorrows of the world around us. In these ways, let us follow Jesus, into the journey of Lent and for all of our lives. Amen.