

Today is that pivotal Sunday of Transfiguration. It’s the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, the season of the light of the Christ Child coming forth into the world, and on this Sunday, Jesus’ light shines brightest, as he is declared to be God’s Beloved. It is a pivotal Sunday for us as Christians, as well, because on this coming Wednesday we begin our journey of Lent; we join others in spirit who long ago traveled the road of Jesus’ ministry.

We don’t know how long Peter, James, and John had been traveling with this itinerant preacher, Jesus. We do know they had left their profession, their home, their father to go on the road with Jesus. They were at the beginning of something, but they weren’t quite sure what that something was. After a long day of teaching to the crowds, Jesus wants to be alone. He needs to center himself and renew his spirit. Mountains are a good place for renewal. These past weeks with rain turned to snow on our mountains, it’s been easy to be renewed and inspired by God’s glorious creation. And since Palestine is similar in terrain to Southern California, perhaps it was a mountain like our Mt. Baldy to which Jesus retreated with three of his followers.

From the point of view of the disciples, they were willing to follow, not knowing where they were going. They said “yes” to sharing a journey that led to an unknown destiny. They gave themselves to a certain mystery because of a holy encounter with Jesus. This is the first point that struck me as I imagined this text from the disciples’ viewpoint: the courage to give oneself not knowing where it will lead.

The second striking detail of this story that emerges as we look through the disciples’ eyes is that they encounter the holy in the ordinariness of human life. The fact that they were followers of Jesus did not transport them to an ethereal monastery. They traveled dusty roads, they got tired and hungry, they sometimes feel asleep when they shouldn’t have; they were very human.

This is a good thing, a hopeful thing, that the Holy can come to us and enter our lives in our very human situations. Knowing this means we can open our eyes and ears on our daily walk and not be very far from the divine. One pastor I know defined piety as “practicing the daily walk with God.” God in Christ comes to us where we are to share our common lot.

The third point that strikes me is what I believe is at the basis of this tent-making deal between Peter, Jesus, and the voice from the cloud. My friend, Elaine Miller-Karas, teaches resources to treat traumas. Part of learning how to treat trauma is learning the common human responses to trauma. When faced with trauma, human beings hardwired to have one of three responses: fight, flight, or freeze. Since we don’t hear James and John saying anything, perhaps they were in a state of freeze at the awesome sight of the cloud, of Elijah and Moses, and of hearing the voice. But Peter, bless his heart, can’t help but react to this extraordinary experience. Though he doesn’t fight with his fist, he feels a need to do something to take charge and control the situation, to define the scope of what’s happening by building three shrines and putting Jesus in one, Moses in another, and Elijah in a third. It’s less frightening if one can contain the unknown within a limited space.

Most of us have done a strategy similar to Peter’s at one time or another. When danger or just the unknown rears up in life-altering, life-challenging ways, we seek ways to protect ourselves, circle the wagons. Sometimes it comes out in perverse behaviors: we may withdraw, we may name the danger “out there” rather than face the danger within. We may react like Peter, with a knee-jerk reaction that doesn’t really help the situation in the long run.

We react from a place of self-protection when we fear something we don't understand. This fear based place in our humanness permeates all our relationships, not only with how we relate to the Holy, but also how we relate to other human beings and how we make socio-political decisions. It draws upon our lesser angels that seek self preservation and protection at any price instead of rising with courage to see the possibilities, drawing on our higher angels of creative, responsive, healing love, joy and hope.

It is true that our response of fear, flight, or freeze is sometimes warranted. It comes from that deep part of our brain known as the "reptilian brain." And it's been necessary for human survival. But there's more to our brain than the reptilian core. We have been blessed with a God given gift of the ability to think, to discern, to weigh the evidence, and to trust. And God expects us to use all these gifts to their fullest!

Perhaps that's why the voice from the cloud intervenes into Peter's little scheme of three shrines. God knew Peter was better than that, capable of more than just reacting to contain his fears. Peter just needed to be still long enough to sense God and to allow for trust. Jim Wallis, who I quoted from last week says: "Faith is to act against all the evidence, and then watch the evidence change." Therefore, we live in hope, in trust, expecting the extravagance of God.

Our humanness cannot thwart God's vision for the world. Our falling asleep, our knee-jerk reactions cannot stop God. Even our fears will not stop God's movement in history. Nothing will thwart the old, old story of God's redeeming, extravagant, all encompassing, love. Thanks be to God!