

## **SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland, MA – February 14, 2010**

### **Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Church of the Holy Spirit, Wayland – The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, Rector**

The Mount of Transfiguration where today's gospel is set is enshrined today atop Mt. Tabor in northern Israel, on the way to the Sea of Galilee. Mt Tabor is a high mountain, but not like what we think of as high mountains here in New England. When we think of mountains we usually think of ranges like the White Mountains, the Green Mountains, or even the Berkshires. We might think of a high mountain as something like Mt. Washington. But, high as Mt. Washington is, there are other mountains around it that are almost as high. That's the difference. Mt. Tabor rises high over the Jezreel Valley in northern Israel, but it is about the only significant hill in the whole area. Out of the middle of what is otherwise a fairly low plain rises this very high mountain. I don't know the geological reason for this topography, but it is dramatic when you see it. Getting up Mt. Tabor is something of a thrill too. The road is much too narrow and twisted for any of the tour buses to negotiate. So, local mini-van taxi drivers take you up at what feels like breakneck speed; they bring you down even faster! Jesus, Peter, James, and John walked; it would have been a little like our climbing Mt. Monadnock. The panoramic view from the top of the plains of the Jezreel Valley is stunning.

The Sundays after the Epiphany, from the gospel of the Baptism to that of the Transfiguration, are framed by the affirmation of Jesus' identity as the Christ of God. On the First after the Epiphany we read the story of Jesus' baptism. That story concluded with words very similar to those in today's gospel with which the transfiguration story concludes. Back at the Jordan River in the desert around the Dead Sea, "a voice came heaven," the gospel said, "'You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'" The sky over the desert there is clear and dry. The Galilee, by contrast, is humid, and the summit of Mt. Tabor can be shrouded in haze or even clouds. Still, the words today are similar. "Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Jesus' identity was tested following the Baptism, but now it is clear. Jesus is the Christ. We are to listen to Jesus; follow Jesus; and be shaped by Jesus.

It is interesting that the Revised Common Lectionary, which we now use in the Episcopal Church includes as the gospel reading for this last Sunday after the Epiphany not only the Transfiguration story but also the one immediately following in which Jesus heals a child possessed by a demon. The gospel makes the point that the manifestations of Christ that we see may be of both these kinds. Sometimes we have mountaintop-like experiences of Christ, in which we see Jesus for who he can most deeply and powerfully be in our lives – the one who sets us free from whatever we fear, the one who forgives us of the things we have not been able to forgive ourselves or for which we have not been able to accept the forgiveness of others, or the one whose promise of new and larger life gives us hope when our own hopes seem hard to sustain. Those are the mountaintop experiences; for most people probably few and far between.

The other manifestations, though, in which Christ can be revealed to us at any moment are the ordinary unexpected ones, the day to day ones in which we are suddenly face to face with the personal pain and desperation of someone or some group of people for whom our empathy is greatly aroused. Maybe it is someone who has been to all the doctors, but none have been able offer a viable treatment (like the disciples who were not able to heal the man's child). Maybe the image of Christ is revealed to us in the suffering of a nation like Haiti, where even before the dead from the earthquake can be accounted the homeless survivors, without even so much as scraps of canvas or sheet metal to cover them, are inundated with the start of Haiti's torrential rainy season. Where did you see Christ last week in the ordinary, everyday things, like the desperate man in the story beseeching Jesus, "Teacher, I beg you, look at my son – my only child?" Where recently have you seen the only Child – the Son – of God?"

But, the whole issue of Christological identity, which undergirds this gospel passage and pervades this time in our liturgical cycle, is much bigger than its relevance just to our personal experiences of Christ. It is about our identity as a church and a congregation. If we are now Christ for others in our world, as our resurrection faith tells us, are we clear about our identity as Jesus was clear on the mountain with Peter, James, and John? Do we know ourselves as rooted in the seminal stories of God's mighty deeds in history – represented in this gospel by Moses and the memory of the exodus – and in God's hope for the human future, represented by Elijah – the one even Jesus and the disciples were taught to believe would come at the end of the age to herald the Messiah and set all people finally free? We live in a culture where many sources compete and interweave to become the mark of who we are, our identity. But, standing now at the bottom of mountain, having encountered once again the world's great need, and realizing that the journey of Lent bids us join in but three days time, are we clear that the mark by which the world should know us is not to be the mark of any of those other sources but one with which we were baptized and which we make visible in the ashes we receive on Ash Wednesday? Are we clear that the identity of us, who are the living, risen Body of Christ in this world, is to be nothing less than the identity of God's Beloved, the Chosen, the One to whom God continues to call us to listen?

Luke's Gospel, in fact, takes exactly this turn at the conclusion of today's passage. "All were astounded at the greatness of God." The healing of the boy that had been so elusive before is the direct result of this clarity of mission now shared among Jesus and the disciples. With certainty about who we are and what we are here to do, it is time for us to join God's larger reconciling mission among all people. A few brief verses beyond where today's passage ends, at verse 51, Luke writes, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem." Mt. Tabor to Jerusalem by car is about a three-hour trip. By Lent, it is a forty-day journey, the one upon which we embark with Jesus this week. While Jerusalem is the destination, though, it turns out not to be the end. For, the journey continues right down to our time and place, to us here this morning.

Like the disciples Jesus gathered around the lakeshore of Galilee, those who went up the mountain, who followed through the plains and valleys of the Jezreel all the way to a road strewn with palms in sight of the great City, those who spent the night in Gethsemane, and those even who went to Golgotha and those who ran astonished from the tomb two days later, like all of them we too are being formed in faith every day we live. May it be faith not only for ourselves but for the world in which God calls us to be the Christ, the Healer, in our time.