

Jesus is more than we realize

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey

Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA, March 3, 2019

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany (year C), Luke 9:28-43a (Exodus 34:29-35)

Luke 9:28-43a Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"-- not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Before I was in ordained ministry, I worked in sales and marketing for the Lincoln Electric Company. Lincoln is a manufacturer in the welding business. One of the stories that I remember from Lincoln was the story of a time when the economy was in recession and sales people had to work hard to find new customers. Many of our salespeople towed around engine driven welding machines to demonstrate to farmers. One day, one of our salesmen, Bob, demonstrated his welding machine to a farmer in his Arkansas territory. Sam, the farmer, came out of his house dressed in his overalls, and was impressed with the demonstration and he bought the welder. But there was more to Sam the farmer. Sam told Bob that he might be interested in selling these welding machines in his stores. Bob didn't realize the farmer had any stores. "Sure," Bob replied. "We can probably work something out. Which stores are we talking about?" And Sam Walton replied "Walmart."

Bob discovered that there was more to this simple farmer than his overalls. Bob discovered that Sam was indeed a farmer, but he was also the owner of a massive chain of stores, someone who would have a huge impact on his business. Bob thought Sam was ordinary, but Sam was more than he realized.

In this Epiphany season, we have encountered Jesus in many new and fresh ways. We have discovered that Jesus cares about us, that Jesus is very much at home in our human lives—he's the life of the party, he connects us in relationships, and that he can challenge us on our living. We have seen Jesus as a friend, as a confidant, a great teacher but still someone like us—someone who walks with us. These are pictures of what theologians call Jesus' *imminence*—Jesus' closeness to us, Jesus' familiarity to us. We speak of God's imminence when we can recognize God, when we see God on human terms.

Evangelical churches with contemporary worship evoke God's imminence. They have praise bands with drum sets and guitars and amplifiers—very much like a rock concert—and on purpose. Their purpose in liturgy is to make God familiar to us, to bring God down to our level. This shows us God's imminence, something we discover as we see how truly human Jesus is. Jesus is truly human so that he can change our humanity. But there's more to Jesus than his carpenter's overalls. Jesus is more than we realize.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The capstone of this season of discovery about Jesus always includes an account of what we call the Transfiguration. Jesus went up a mountain with Peter, James and John. And then he was transfigured—he shone with a supernatural radiance, and spoke with the great prophets from the past—Moses the lawgiver and Elijah, the herald of the Messiah. Then a cloud enshrouded them, and the disciples were terrified. They knew that they were in the nearer presence of the one who created the universe—they were in the presence of God almighty.

In the Old Testament, God's nearer presence is often described as “the glory of the Lord.” The glory of the Lord is often connected with lightning or fire enshrouded by cloud or smoke. Think of the pillar of fire by night and cloud by day that the Israelites followed in the desert—or the burning bush, or Isaiah's vision of fire and smoke in the throne room of heaven. When Jesus shines with supernatural radiance, and the cloud encircles them, this is a vision of the glory of the Lord. Then God the Father speaks to them: This is my Son, my Chosen: Listen to him!”

The disciples are terrified, as you and I might be terrified. Jesus is more than they realized. This is a vision of God's *transcendence*. God's transcendence is the way in which God is entirely different from us, powerful and majestic—the creator of the universe whose little finger holds the power of suns and planets and galaxies. This is a Holy God, distinct from creation and entirely above our sinful world. This is not the nature-god, or the god of abstract ideas and principals of moral philosophy—this is the real God who creates all that is.

If contemporary Evangelical worship shows us God's imminence, Eastern Orthodox worship shows us God's transcendence. You walk into the worship of an Eastern Orthodox church and the place is filled with the smells and the smoke of incense, and the mysterious art of icons on the walls. The clergy in long beards and elaborate vestments process in circles, chanting in Greek and disappearing behind screens into the holy of holies. It is an “other-worldly” experience—and purposefully so! The point of Eastern Orthodox worship is not to bring God down to our level, but to literally lift us up into heaven—into the presence of the holy and transcendent God.

So the disciples on the mountain top come face to face with the transcendent God. But then, the cloud departs, and Jesus' human appearance returns, and they go down the mountain to continue their mission to Jerusalem. Now they understand more about what their mission means.

The disciples discovered that there was something more to Jesus than his carpenter's overalls. They discovered that there was something more to Jesus than just being a great teacher, something more powerful than even a great businessman. They discovered that Jesus is more than even a merely human messiah. They discovered that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine—the human being who is close to us, and the God of the universe who created us.

In Jesus, the transcendence and imminence of God meet together. In Jesus, the power of galaxies in the little finger of God is the same power that opens his hands to reach out to the poor, and who opens his arms to embrace and forgive us. In Jesus, we find, not simply a great moral teacher, but God in human flesh with the power to truly change lives. In Jesus, the God of the universe seeks to know us personally, and to be known personally by us. Jesus is more than we realize.

In our culture, we often underestimate Jesus. We often domesticate Jesus as a story book figure or a metaphor for common decency or compassion. But Jesus is more than we realize. We find it easier to think of Jesus as a symbol or a story, rather than someone we would obey, someone we would put ahead of everything else in our lives—the one to whom we would give all our life. But Jesus is more than we realize. Jesus is the God of the universe as real as we are, come to this world to reveal himself more fully, to free us from evil and give us new life.

Every now and then, Jesus breaks through our attempts to tame him. God reminds us that he is real, and that we would do well to listen to him and take him seriously. When we find ourselves in the presence of God, we can be overwhelmed, like Peter and James and John. We are left speechless when the God of the universe reaches out to us to know us personally and to love us dearly.

You may have come to church seeking religious principals, or good self-improvement teaching, but you can discover far more in Jesus Christ. For he is God's beloved Son, his chosen one. As the season of Lent begins this week, join with the disciples and listen to him. Go on a journey with Jesus this Lent and discover the one who knows you better than you know yourself—the one who loves you and offers a new and joyful life in him. Jesus is more than you realize.