

Trinity, Collinsville, February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Corinth 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-36

The Rev. Dr. Frank G. Kirkpatrick

This is the last Sunday after the Epiphany. What that means in our yearly Christian calendar is that we bring to an end a period of time, dating from January 6, during which we have celebrated the almost supernatural recognition by the Wise Men and the Shepherds of the special messianic power of this babe whom they lay eyes on only briefly while he still lies helplessly on a manger floor. Now without detracting from the power of the stories about Jesus' birth and the star which led the wise men to do homage to him while he was still only a few days old, I think we can say that the story of Jesus as it begins to connect with our lives really begins now, at the end of the Epiphany season. The time that begins now in the church calendar for nearly 7 weeks of Lent, is the time during which we will recall the events of Jesus' adult life. All the scripture readings from the Gospels during this upcoming Lenten period tell of the active ministry of the mature Jesus: preaching, healing, teaching, and traveling. It is during this period that ordinary human beings (not wise men or angels) encounter and are encountered by this remarkable person and have their lives deeply affected, even transformed by him.

I suspect it is much easier for us today to identify with the various people, often in crowds, whom Jesus met and preached to during his adult years than it is to identify with wise men who possessed fabulous wealth or with shepherds who were led by a star and singing angels to see a future messiah in the form of a helpless baby in an obscure shed in the minor town of Bethlehem in the backwater nation of ancient Israel. Most of us, and I think rightly, want some more evidence that someone is a messiah than the illumination of a bright star or a dream focused on someone less than a week old. Most of us simply aren't privileged with special insight into things that, on the surface, don't seem at the present moment to point to what they later turn out to be. If I were to proclaim that I saw, with certainty, a future president of the United States in my granddaughter's nursery class, you would have every reason to consider me a bit crazy.

But when we encounter mature persons who speak to us in words that touch our souls and burn our hearts with their charisma, insight, and understanding, we are far more

justified in taking them as persons with a special kind of power that demands to be taken seriously. And that is the case with all of those who will see, hear, and be touched by Jesus in the stories we will read and hear in the weeks to come, until that tragic final week of his life at the end of which he will be crucified and, according to the testimony of some who were there, subsequently rise from the dead.

All those who became followers of Jesus during his lifetime did so because of the adult Jesus' impact on their lives. We have to remember that James, Peter, John and Matthew, along with all the other disciples, did not have the stories of Jesus' birth or of the Epiphany to draw upon. These stories were not developed until after Jesus' death and resurrection, when it became clear to those who would be called Christians that he truly was, for them, a messiah. (It's interesting to note that we hear nothing more in the biblical texts of the shepherds or of the Wise Men. If they truly took the baby in the manger to be the Messiah, why weren't they around when he grew up, proclaiming his truth and power?) The people who actually followed Jesus were people who encountered him only in his adulthood, as someone who revealed himself by his words and actions. They had to respond to him based on what he was actually saying in their presence, not on myths or legends about his birth, none of which had yet been created. They had to see for themselves the ways in which he touched people, literally through his curing of disease, but also through the ways in which he both challenged and comforted them, as the occasion demanded. He spoke, as the Scriptures say, as one with authority. He preached a gospel: literally good news, to the poor and oppressed. He pointed beyond the law to love as the meaning of human life. He reached people who felt guilty for their sins and he forgave them. He demonstrated a depth and range of compassion for people, especially those who had been broken by the world, rejected as unworthy by others and by their own sense of self-reproach, and he welcomed and embraced them. He directed his listeners to a power that challenged all human forms of security, identity, and authority. In short, what he preached transformed people from the inside out because he grounded his preaching in the power of a God who alone could provide what all of them truly wanted: namely, fulfillment, well-being, and the complete flourishing of all that had been created by God as good and holy within them.

But each of those whom Jesus touched was unique: unique in his or her own particular human way. Each brought to Jesus a distinct and distinctive personal history, replete with all the confusions, anxieties, ambiguities,

incompleteness, potentialities, and complexities that ultimately define any human life. And Jesus responded to each person in his or her uniqueness, whether it was a mother requesting a miracle at a wedding reception, or a Samaritan woman, or a roman centurion, or a tax-collector, or a prostitute, or a bunch of frightened fishermen. Jesus did not respond to them as a class or as representatives of a group, but as individuals. He was not, for them, a symbol or an image illuminated by a shining star and surrounded by myths and legends. He was not a doctrine or a concept or a symbol dressed up as a human being. He was himself a unique individual person reaching them in their particularities as unique individual persons.

And that is why, once again, I think the stories of Jesus from this moment until his death reach us more powerfully than all the symbolism of Christmas and Epiphany and even of this last day of Epiphany when Scripture recounts his transfiguration in the presence of his disciples. For most of us do not encounter Jesus with a privileged insider's knowledge or supernatural revelation, accompanied by the singing of angels, as happened to the wise men, or the shepherds, or even the disciples. Most of us encounter Jesus as ordinary people, with no insider knowledge (such as miraculous illumination). Most of us encounter Jesus as the fallible, mixed-up, ambiguous, complex, but utterly unique and individual persons that we are. And when Jesus meets us he does not do so as a symbol, or a theological doctrine, or a stained-glass image. Of course, today we don't have the benefit of seeing his body or hearing words come forth from his mouth or receiving the physical touch of his healing fingers. But we can meet him through the words of Scripture and through the power of the Holy Spirit who continues his work in us. And we can meet him in these ways as adults: adult to adult, standing ready to take in and discern what he has to say to us in the midst of our particular identities, as his words are communicated to us through Scripture and illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

And when that happens, again as thinking adults, we will have to discern how to respond. And here the image that Paul gives us of the Christian community in his letter to the Corinthians is a powerful and instructive one. Each of us, because we are unique persons, has a form of ministry that is not the same as others. But together we are compelled to commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the community in the sight of God. We belong to a community of faith in which we can share our insights into what we hear about Jesus and how we are moved to respond in our lives to what we hear.

It is a common image, but a good one, that we (the church) are the body of Christ. We may not have Jesus' own body, or mouth, or fingers: but as his new body, animated by the Holy Spirit, we have particular bodies and mouths and fingers and minds and voices that can carry on the work of Jesus in our time and place, here and now. When we put all these organs to work in unison we get a living organism that can both empower all its members and do the work collectively and individually that God has given us to do. We are not alone and we do not have to rely on privileged, angelic illumination: we have the gospel written down and translated in words and we have it also in the flesh in the works of ministry found in all those around us who constitute our Christian community. As we enter the weeks of Lent, let us therefore be with our community in prayer, hearing, reflection, and discernment as we open ourselves to the words and works of Jesus as found in the scripture. For here is where Jesus will meet us and transform us if we stand ready to open ourselves fully and completely to him.

AMEN

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