

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

February 3, 2008

Epiphany Last

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the end of our very short Epiphany Season. (Don't worry about the lessons we'll miss, we'll get them later on during our preternaturally long 2008 Pentecost Season!) Each year on this Last Sunday of Epiphany, we read one of the three Synoptic Gospels' accounts of the Transfiguration of Jesus. This year it is Matthew's. What is the meaning of this event? And why do we read about it on the Last Sunday of Epiphany year in and year out?

Did you notice the setting of the event? Jesus took the three favored disciples and led them up "a high mountain by themselves". In the Bible, mountains frequently are involved when there are encounters between humans and God. Moses was told to ascend to the top of Mount Sinai to converse with God; it was atop Mount Sinai that God gave him the 10 Commandments and the Law. It was atop Mt. Horab that the Prophet Elijah encountered God. I don't know what it is about mountains that figure into encounters with the divine. It seems to be true in many different faith traditions, not only our Judeo-Christian tradition.

I used to think that in ancient times mountains got associated with encounters with God because people used to believe that the earth was flat and the Universe was like a three decker house – the earth was in the middle, Sheol was below and Heaven

where God resided was above. Being on a mountain was thus the closest spot on earth to God who lived “up there”. I think there is still a lot of this earth and human centered thinking in our theology. But we have to move beyond that; our cosmology and our scientific knowledge have given God a much bigger canvas to display God’s nature and encounters with us. An experience I had in seminary got me to think there may be more to mountains than simply their proximity to the heaven we create in our own imaginations.

I had gone to Korea to attend a theological conference with some fellow students and our professor, Dr. Suh, who was from Korea. After the conference, Dr. Suh took us on a sightseeing trip and one place we visited was a beautiful ancient Buddhist monastery. Like many such monasteries, this one was out in the country and nestled in a valley in the mountains. Dr. Suh gave us the afternoon off and told us to do whatever we felt called to do as a spiritual exercise. For some reason, rather than praying or reading, I felt impelled to hike to the top of the highest mountain in the area.

Along the way, I noticed a change in my perception of the hikers I encountered as well as a difference in their reactions to me. For some reason our common interest and situation as hikers climbing a mountain overshadowed our differences. It seemed that they stopped being for me those different Asian folks and I stopped being for them that strange white guy from God knows where. The further along we went, it seemed the more collegial and friendly we became. Eventually, it seemed to me that we just became fellow seekers and fellow travelers.

The journey had a way of changing our perceptions. It was then that I realized that for this to have happened, I first had to be willing to leave behind my familiar classmates and all the expectations and judgments I might have about the other things I

thought I should have done instead. I had to be willing to not only go someplace new and unknown but to do so with open enthusiasm. Then I realized that the higher I got, the harder the climb became. That is something all mountains seem to have in common. The temptation arose to turn back: you've seen enough; you'll be late getting back for the meeting, etc. But as the beauty and the largeness of the panorama before me grew with each step, I continued on. These kinds of spiritual climbs take not only stamina and persistence but you have to fight a lot of old fears and doubts that are in our own heads.

Finally I reached the summit and I climbed to the top of the largest boulder that was on the summit. I had a 360 degree view of the world around me. I sat there for a while and I realized that if I was wanting to climb to God, I couldn't go any further; I had gone as far and as high as my own efforts could possibly take me that afternoon. If I expected to encounter God on mountaintops, I had to believe that God was also willing to make the effort to be there waiting for me. That is the root of all – the willingness to believe that belief is possible.

For me, the Transfiguration is about the miracle of faith – the faith of Jesus that led him up the mountain and the faith of the disciples who were willing to follow. I think the Transfiguration is more than a miracle story about Jesus turning dazzling white and the disciples seeing something never seen before. For me this story is not only just about Jesus and God but about Jesus' faith the God was up there waiting and his desire to teach this truth to his disciples.

Thomas Merton, a deeply grounded Trappist monk but also a restless explorer of the spiritual world in all its dimensions and one willing to look beyond traditional church expressions, once wrote: "The basic Christian answer to hatred is not the

commandment to love, but what must necessarily come before in order to make the commandment bearable and comprehensible. It is a prior commandment to believe. The root of Christian love is not the will to love, but the faith that one is loved, [and]... until this discovery is made, until this liberation has been brought about by divine mercy, men and women are imprisoned in hate.” In short, we have to have the faith to see beyond our expectations and even beyond our fears.

Why do we read it each year on the Sunday before the start of Lent? During Lent we will be walking toward another hill where Jesus will again be found between two others. During Lent, through whatever means we select, we will be disciplining ourselves in order to better see the power of Jesus and we will strain to make sense of the cross as it comes closer. The world can often look grim and totally unjust at the foot of a cross –whether it is the cross on Mt. Calvary or the crosses we fashion for ourselves and others today. Fear and hatred imprison us; they diminish us. The Transfiguration shows us that God indeed waits for us as we struggle to climb our mountains towards belief. It is the height of the Transfiguration – the demonstration and effects of knowing that we are indeed loved – that allows us to see beyond and through the Good Friday and the many other crosses in this world and in our own lives.

Amen.