

EPIPHANY LAST

Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.” Luke 9: 40

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany, which can also be known as the Sunday of the Transfiguration. Ever since I’ve been preaching, the Gospel for all three years of the lectionary cycle has been the same: the story of Jesus on a mountaintop, being transfigured into a dazzling vision and accompanied by Moses and Elijah. Also, God speaks, saying, *This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him.*

The gospelists present this, I believe, as a bookend story to the story of Jesus’ baptism, the other moment when God speaks and claims Jesus as the Son, the Chosen. But of course, Peter and John and James were not at that baptismal event, so here’s a chance for them to be convinced. By why now, as we are about to enter Lent? Well, because this moment marks the moment after which Jesus will turn *his face toward Jerusalem*, and begin his inexorable journey toward his death. God anoints this moment, the story of the Transfiguration tells us.

That said, in our new Revised Common Lectionary cycle we have, on this Last Epiphany of Year C, an addition to the mountaintop moment. Some stories are just hard to preach about year in and year out; it’s a challenge to come up with a new angle on “peak experience.” Moreover, while the Transfiguration story has its enchantments, it’s a story that stresses the exalted Jesus, the divine Jesus, and may have the effect of creating distance between him and us rather than bringing us closer.

And my project recently in my preaching has been to try to bring Jesus closer, to emphasize his very human qualities. That seems particularly important as we are about to enter the season of Lent, a time when we are asked to consider ways in which we fall short of God’s hope for us, to consider how we may repent and turn more fully toward the light of compassion and justice-seeking. I believe that task is more daunting and potentially depressing if we experience Jesus always as a remote and perfect being.

Moreover, if Jesus’ journey toward Jerusalem is to have real depth and relevance for us – for our own lives – we have to believe and feel his humanity, his capacity for suffering, his vulnerability to the same stresses, hurts, and disappointments that afflict all of us. Otherwise, the story of that journey is just another story, remote and unhelpful as we struggle with our own messy lives.

And today’s additional story here from Luke shows us a very human Jesus.

You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here. Here's Jesus at his most petulant and exasperated, judgmental and short-tempered. And these caustic words are response to a desperate father with an only son who is the grips of a terrible affliction, what the world then understood as demon possession and what sounds to us a lot like epilepsy. How would we feel if we took a precious only son, who was in the midst of a *grand mal* seizure, to a doctor, only to be called rude names? Because that's more or less what happens here.

Jesus' "peak experience" on the mountaintop doesn't seem, in this vignette, to have done his morale a lot of good. Or perhaps he's feeling what we're all familiar with after a moment of elevation –the inevitable return to lower ground, to the baseline of demanding, often unrewarding, daily life, the crash.

But after this moment of venting, Jesus relents – as he always does with those who come to him in genuine need – and heals the boy. And *gives him back* to his father, Luke says. And gives him back, not just in the sense of *hands him over*, but gives back the full boy, the healed, whole, boy. This moment of human intimacy – a father wild with grief and fear appealing to a weary, irritable, imperiled healer – becomes a transforming moment for everyone involved. Because in addition to the principals, there's a great crowd watching who, at the end, *are all astounded at the greatness of God*. So this reluctant and impromptu healing becomes, really, a moment with more widespread impact than that strange exclusive moment on the mountaintop.

I've been reading a book whose title I have some trepidation about announcing from the pulpit. But it's not my title, so here goes. It's called, **Hos, Hookers, Call Girls, and Rent Boys**. And the subtitle is, **Professionals Writing on Life, Love, Money, and Sex**. Where, you may ask, do I get my reading list? One answer is *The New York Times Book Review*, which is where this recommendation came from.

I have to say, the quality of the writing in this anthology of essays is high. And the reason I bring the book in to this sermon is that a great deal of what is written echoes themes that I try to stress in my preaching: the theme that all of us, all of us, are broken people, damaged in some way or other. And the theme that sharing our stories is, or should be, part of our healing process.

Here's what the editor of the anthology writes.

I used to think that if I revealed the worst things about myself, people would be repulsed and would try to make me feel repulsive. And yes, some people do that. But the real result– and I have a large data pool to choose from at this point– is that people are drawn to someone who's willing to reveal the monstrous truth. Let's face it, the longer

you live, the greater your chance of having suffering inflicted upon you, of having something dark, poisonous, and ugly living inside you... People feel they can reveal their freakiest (stuff) to me. Because they can. Because they know I'm not going to say, I don't believe you. I 'm not going to say rude things behind their back. I'm not going to reduce them or make them feel repulsive because they have revealed that they are a freak. It's my contention that we're all freaks. I just choose to fly my freak flag high.

And here's one of the contributors

We had these long intense conversations that would go deep into the dark night, conversations I can't have with almost anybody else, because if you try, they either nod their heads sympathetically like you are a miserable wretch, or they think you're making the whole thing up, or they're paralyzed by their own weird feelings about the whole thing that they have no idea so that they have no idea how to respond, or they're disgusted and treat you like some depraved, degenerate, disgusting, sick sideshow traveling circus freak.

I am happy to report that it's a great, great feeling to know that you're not crazy. And that you're not alone.

Several years ago I had one of my very rare visionary kinds of experiences. I was lying – I remember this vividly– I was lying on my bed in my bedroom at my parents' house, the room I'd had since childhood, and I was thinking about some memoir writing I was working on. I was reflecting back on my various adventures of my single life, and wondering how to write about all that, (or not – how much did I want to admit to?) and I had this sudden awareness that gripped my entire being . (It seems impossible to talk about such moments without resorting to clichés.) What I saw, in a wordless flash, was that if my life had been somewhat different, I could have become one of the people listed in the title of the book I'm reading. If I had not been blessed by the accident of privilege – not intelligence, not education, not temperament – but simply and only privilege – I might have become someone who, to be blunt, exchanged sex for money.

This was as humbling an experience as I've ever had, perhaps – right up there with spending a month in rehab. My vision, if that's what it was, plunged me into a sense of connection with all of humanity that I'd never had before. I believe it's made me a more compassionate person and priest.

I don't find this entirely easy to talk about. But if there's any consistent feedback I get on my preaching, it's that my willingness to be open about you with my own life, my own brokenness, makes me more accessible and helps you to feel less anxious or ashamed about your own stories. I hope that my personal reflections may be received as

an invitation – an invitation to be more self-revelatory yourselves. And that’s an invitation that comes, not first and foremost, from me, but from Jesus, the very human Jesus we see in today’s Gospel.

Just imagine, if the father of the epileptic son had stayed home, too embarrassed by the spectacle of his son’s fits, his shrieking and foaming at the mouth, to expose the child and the family to public scrutiny? What if all those Jesus heals had stayed away – the woman who’d been bleeding for 12 years, the blind men, the cripples, the poor Gerasene demoniac? Their afflictions are outward, disfiguring, fully visible, and since such handicaps were felt, in Jesus’ time, to be signs of sin, they are shameful marks indeed. But they come anyway, more eager for hope and healing than they are mortified by their brokenness. They have faith that change is possible, that healing is within grasp. And so they risk.

Our afflictions tend to be more inward, less visible to the naked eye. But our shame is not necessarily less acute, our fear of rejection less paralyzing. But think of the excerpts I quoted from members of the world’s oldest profession: think of the healing they’ve experienced in sharing their stories with others. They don’t talk about Jesus, at least most of them don’t, but I believe that in listening, and hearing, with compassion, understanding, and forgiveness, they are encountering the living Christ.

In the book we’re going to read in our Lenten discussion group, Mary Gordon tells the following story.

I wandered once by chance into a Catholic church in San Francisco where the Mass was being said half in Chinese, and half in English. The priest, who was Chinese, preached on the Transfiguration. “We don’t know whether this really happened,” he said, but if it did, it was one of those moments where the veil between the invisible and the visible is torn away.” He spoke of a mentally handicapped man with whom he worked. When he asked the man if he prayed, the man said he did, and when he prayed, what he meant was that he listened. The priest asked what he heard. The man said, “I hear: you are my beloved.” The priest told the congregation, “This is what we should always be hearing.”

This is what we should always be hearing, my dear friends. Alleluia ! Amen

