Transfiguration Sunday February 7, 2016

Reading: Luke 9:28-36

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

How often, when you have to make a difficult decision, are you absolutely sure that you’ve made the right choice? Even when it comes to deciding how you feel about something, or what you believe, how often are you completely free from any lingering doubt?

If you are like many of us (and perhaps most), you know what it’s like to be plagued by mixed feelings. On many issues, you’re able to see both sides of a matter, and deciding with total assurance which way to go sometimes, many times, seems nearly impossible.

Often we can see enough problems and pitfalls with the opposing sides of an issue that we’re unable to embrace either with any enthusiasm. And, of course, some issues have more than just two sides.

Even those Christians who are confident in their faith and tend to see things pretty much from a “black or white” perspective still must admit that the toughest issues are in shades of gray.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, “All truths are half-truths,” and while we might not even agree with that totally, we can understand his point.

 2

Take, for example, the matter of gun control. Some people claim that government registration and control of all firearms is the only way to truly safeguard America. But others argue that any attempt to register or control guns is a serious infringement on personal freedom that actually endangers America, rather than protects it.

Personally, I find myself having some understanding of both positions, but agreeing with neither in the farthest extreme. In neither position do I find the full empathy for all concerned that I’d personally like to see.

Having a divided mind is not unknown in the field of faith, and not unknown even in scripture itself. In the Gospel of Mark, chapter nine, is the story of a son who had dangerous seizures. His father brings this boy to Jesus and asks if Jesus can do anything to help.

Jesus tells him that “all things can be done for the one who believes” (Mark 9:23b, NRSV). And at that, the father replies, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24b, NRSV) and as contradictory as that sounds, many of us likely know exactly what that father meant.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and what happened on that mountain is remarkable. And Jesus’ change in appearance on that special occasion was apparently as confusing and perplexing for the disciples who witnessed it as it was clarifying and defining for Jesus who experienced it.

 3

Let me say more about that: if Jesus had any doubts that he was to go to the Cross, they were likely resolved right there. According to Luke, within days after Jesus came down from the mountain, “he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51, NRSV). Jesus had arrived at “certainty.”

The “glare” of that remarkable Transfiguration event still “blinded” the disciples, however. They were still struggling to grasp the significance of what the voice from heaven had told them.

They didn’t even begin to understand that it meant that Jesus must die. Jesus, however, had now the assurance that he was heading toward where he needed to be, even if it would be a difficult road to travel (and it would).

My observation is that life doesn’t grant most of us many Transfiguration-type experiences. Only occasionally do we come across things that we can affirm without reservation, but there are some – and these are found in God’s holy Word.

One is assuredly the unfailing and deep love which God has for each and every one of us. The Bible teaches that the Lord our God is not only a king and holy, as we sang in the psalm this morning; He is also a lover of justice and a forgiving God, as we also sang.

 4

Page after page after page of God’s holy Word, in both the Old Testament and the New, attest strongly to the depth and greatness of God’s love for us. The words which Moses heard on Mount Sinai were true:

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness …” (Exodus 34:6, NRSV). Hearing those words, Moses’ response was to bow his head and worship God, and to pray a prayer of confession of sin for the people.

And this leads us to another great truth in Scripture which we can affirm without reservation – that Christ died for our sins. No matter how effective we are in communicating the Christian gospel, the heart of this message is that Jesus not only died, but He died for you and me, to take away our sins.

Just as the words which Moses heard on Mount Sinai were true, so, too, are the words of the Apostle Paul true as he wrote to the Christians in Rome: “… God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, NRSV).

There are other examples to cite as well, many other Bible promises, but the point is, God does give us some things we that can be sure about, even as he gave Jesus the Transfiguration.

 5

And these few sure things are powerful clues to the higher reality of life, and to the presence of God himself.

So even though we live with all sorts of ongoing questions and complexities, still I believe we have enough clues that God is real and loving, and in scripture God is sharing with us enough truth to sustain our faith despite our doubts.

Still, we wonder: why is life so murky – more shades of gray than black-and-white? Why can’t we have more clarity and deeper understanding of most things? I don’t know. There’s no clarity on this, either.

Christian scholar and author Philip Yancey, writing about the thinking of G.K. Chesterton, an Englishman and a great religious writer of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, said that Chesterton believed that “the riddles of God prove more satisfying than the answers proposed without God.”

There aren’t a lot of Transfiguration-type events in our lives, but there are enough things about which we can be certain to assure us of God’s ongoing care for us and about us. Living in the midst of ambiguities, we need those few spots of certainty about which we can simply rejoice and praise God, and then move on.

Move on? Yes.

 6

On the Mount of Transfiguration, after seeing this dazzling display, Peter suggests erecting three “dwellings,” sort of monuments to this moment of Christ’s certainty, but Jesus doesn’t take Peter up on that suggestion.

Instead, he leads the men back down the mountain, back to the activities of their work, and they move on. And so should we.

As individuals, as members of the church, as citizens and as a nation we have to make the best decisions we can, but we do so knowing that most of the time certainty about the outcome, and often even about the rightness of the chosen solution, is not possible.

But we can look at those few things about which we can be positive, and thank God that those are given for our benefit and to assure us that we are not alone in this world. About these few sure things, there is no blinding glare, just the warm and bright joy of God’s goodness – and that’s enough. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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