March 2, 2014 Norwalk

**Pastoral Prayer**

God of transformation -- the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, and yet always and even now creating something new -- we give you thanks for the intersection of continuity and innovation at which we stand this day; grateful for the leaders past who called and inspired and built and blazed a trail along which we have followed; grateful no less for the anticipation of all that lies ahead, the outline of which is still beyond our capacity to see. It is a fearful, sometimes sentimental, and yet exhilarating moment in our discipleship and we entrust ourselves to your leading hand. For you, we know, have not stayed behind us, trapped in memory, but are even now moving ahead; beckoning; calling our name. We pray for the courage to go along with you.

We pray, as well, for those whose movements just now are slower and need, in special ways, our companionship. We pray for those who are ill, who are anxious, who are confused or who have put themselves in danger on our behalf. Bless them, we pray, with a sense of your presence even as they experience ours.

God of transformation, continue your transformational work in our lives and in our church, for we commit ourselves to your care and leading in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our father, who art in heaven…

**Matthew 17:1-9**

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”*

***A Sign For You***

Whether or not we actually paid much attention to it, the calendar recently set aside a space for “President’s Day” -- a hybrid holiday commemorating the births of two significant Presidents -- George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Now my guess is that every President has his frustrations, but these two seem to me united by more than proximate birthdays. Washington, presiding over the eruptive birth of a nascent nation, and all the competing interests and strong personalities that had to feel like herding cats. Lincoln, the erstwhile and perennially unsuccessful candidate suddenly thrust into the Presidency at the very time the Republic was pulling apart at the seams. I’ve got to imagine that both of these now-revered “elder statesmen” had more than one moment when they were ready to sign a letter of resignation and vacate the White House for a quieter, simpler life back home.

Somehow, however, each discerned a sustaining and compelling call deep in the night or deep in the soul to “go on.” A galvanizing moment when they were convicted by a voice insisting, reassuring that, “You were born for this very work.”

The Irish talk about such experiences in spatial terms – as “thin places,” where two worlds meet; where the usually thick cartilage buffering heaven and earth narrows to such wafer thinness as to permit one to reach over into the other. Some believe there are literal “thin places” -- spiritual hotspots like Sedona in Arizona, like the island of Iona in Scotland, like Mecca or Jerusalem or Mount Sinai. But for others, “thin places” are less literal and more experiential – as any place where our hearts are uniquely opened – a small inn in Vermont, a campsite in Yosemite National Park, a Colorado vista, a vesper center at church camp, a particular piece of music or painting or poem; a burst of fireworks against a night sky; a clarifying moment; a person; a ritual.

One of those places in my life was the service that took place a 33 years ago in Abilene, TX during which certain of my credentials and commendations were read, a sermon was preached, and I – the object of all this attention – was directed to kneel at the steps to the chancel while the elders of that congregation and miscellaneous ministers who had gathered for the occasion placed their hands on my head and shoulders and prayed for the ministry I was beginning. It was, in the tradition of the ancient church, an “ordination.” A “thin place” par excellence.

But just what is the “action” in a service of ordination, and who is the intended audience? In an objective sense, ordination is the official act by which the church sets one apart for ministry. It doesn't so much impute assets or install in the candidate gifts and graces that were not there before, but rather affirms the church's recognition of those that already were. It is, in a way, an official authorization to serve the church in this particular way – a kind of *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval denoting that this person has successfully satisfied the basic minimum requirements for the task. In that sense, the intended audience is the wider church whose interested eyes might every now and then fall on this person with a ministry in mind. You've gotten to share in a couple of those in recent years.

But more often than I ever dreamed I find myself thinking about the comment made by one of my seminary professors. Ordination, he asserted, for all its potential value to the church, is ultimately for the benefit of the candidate. “There will be times,” he told us, “when you will doubt your abilities; doubt your gifts; doubt your calling. In the midst of those seasons of doubt,” he said, “ordination will stand as a kind of collective reminder and reassurance – that though you may not be able to see them, the *church* has recognized your gifts and affirmed your graces; the *church* has seen God working in you in ways that make you suitable for this work. Ordination,” he asserted, “more than anything is the church's gift to help you remember.”

I think of that clarification as I read this familiar story. Jesus and a few of his closest disciples ascend a mountain presumably for a little “R & R”. While there, some amazing things happened -- strange visitations; heavenly voices; and awe. For whose benefit did this mountaintop experience take place? Was it for *Jesus*, perhaps needing some encouragement and validation at this point in his ministry? Was it for the *disciples*, and by extension, all of us latter day disciples who routinely need a little dose of confirmation when our faith begins to wane from the difficulties or perhaps merely the distractions.

Why, I wonder, did this episode take place – and why now, at this point in the story? After all, as far as we are concerned we have already heard a voice from the heavens claiming Jesus as God's very own beloved. When he was baptized we heard that voice and those words on the wings of God's descending Spirit. Why this Yogi Bera-like “deja vu all over again?”

And what are we to make of the mysterious visitations and affectations? According to the story, it wasn't until they heard the voice from the heavens that the disciples fell to the ground in fear, but I've got to say that if two dead people were to suddenly appear in my company, that would be quite enough to get me looking for a rock to hide behind. And Jesus, bleached and radioactive. What's this all about?

Maybe, as I think about it, this “thin place” was all for the benefit of Moses and Elijah. If ever anyone deserved some affirmation, they should be entitled. Both men served God valiantly in less than desirable circumstances, undergoing hard times and serious dangers with precious little TLC.

For Elijah, it was life as a hunted fugitive; hiding out, trying to remain faithful while also trying to remain alive. Sure he had his exciting successes – humiliating the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel in a fiery demonstration, and pulling off various noteworthy miracles. But it was hardly all glory. And when he really needed a sign – really needed some spiritual “get up and go,” what he got was not thunderclap sounds from God or mighty winds, but a puny little still, small voice.

And Moses, after risking his life in front of the King of Egypt and nurse-maiding the Israelites across the wilderness, what was his reward? A a distant view from a mountaintop of the promised land that, after all his work and heartache and risk, he would not get to actually enter. It must have been like being paraded through a cafeteria line to look at all the entrés and options but not getting to actually eat any of it. That, and an unmarked grave.

Maybe, then, this little conflab on the mountain top was for the two of them – Moses and Elijah; a little overdue recognition that all their efforts had not been in vain; that something had actually come of their people, their fidelity, their vision, their lives. All the law and the prophets, incarnate in this one. It doesn't take much. Just little things suffice. It doesn't take much light piercing the thick darkness to offer a little glimmer of hope. Maybe God was throwing Moses and Elijah a bone.

It could, of course, be that this story is more a hindrance than a help – more of a separation than an inspiration. It could, more than anything else, create unfortunate distance – calling attention, as it seems to do, to Jesus' uniqueness rather than his similarity.

Think, for a moment, about an example I've already given. Does celebrating Washington’s and Lincoln’s birthdays and, by extension, their accomplishments come at the expense of separating their work from our own? Do the red letters on our calendars implicitly suggest that what they did was unique, extraordinary, out of the reach of the rest of us -- crafting community, protecting the vulnerable, demanding equality? Wouldn't they, by contrast, argue that what they were about is *precisely* the work of us all? And what, then, of Jesus – spiritually visited and all radioactive? Would Jesus want to underscore how he is *like* us, rather than how we are *different*?

Not only Matthew, but Mark and Luke as well include this story in their tellings, and the second letter of Peter. What did they all want us to hear in it, and how might this story nourish us? Well, of course I can't say with any certainty – I have had no such special visitation. But I do think there is more than enough grace here to go around – in a way that affords a “thin place” for all of those concerned.

God knows the disciples were always in need of some nudging and clarification, and if seeing all the pieces assembled in one place – the personification of the law, the embodiment of the prophets, the mountaintop, the glow of God's own presence and the sound of God's own voice saying, in effect, “get it?” -- helped them along, then well and good.

And are we so blinded by our conviction about the divinity of Jesus that we can't appreciate how his humanity might have appreciated a little encouragement and affirmation along the way, as well?

And if Jesus and his disciples could benefit from the experience of a “thin place”, when they felt God and the company of heaven close enough to touch, can it be all that terrible to admit that we could use one from time to time? It's easy to get discouraged. It's easy to get covered up and burdened down – professionally, to be sure, emotionally and psychologically, but also spiritually. It doesn't take all that much to keep us going, but we, too, every now and then, need a sign -- need to feel the nearness of heaven, the proximity of the holy in all its manifestations; every now and then, we, too, need – if only for a moment -- to be paralyzed by glory, to be visited by truth, to see between the cracks a little blaze of light.

Maybe Leonard Cohen was thinking of those places when he wrote this chorus in his song *Anthem*:

*Ring the bells that still can ring.*

*Forget your perfect offering.*

*There is a crack in everything.*

*That's how the light gets in.* [1]

And maybe this story, itself, can be for us one of those cracks through which the light of God gets in..

...to buoy;

...to encourage;

...to affirm;

...to bless.

[1] (1993 Leonard Cohen & Sony Music Entertainment)