

March 6, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible: Exodus: 24; 12-18

Epistle: 2 Peter 1: 16-21

Gospel: Matthew 17: 1-9

CHANGED?.....WHO ME?

This is such a difficult question for any of us? Are we changed by our faith? Does being a follower of Jesus make a fundamental change in who and how we are? When we make the decision to follow Jesus, the one who was sent by God to save us, does that decision bring about a radical difference in our lives. It's a difficult question. It is a question that most of us would rather avoid or skirt around. We would much rather; I think, just be "busy" with our "doing" rather than be conscious of our "being". We humans cannot fully fathom God and Jesus. They are fully other to us, and yet we are reminded continually in our faith, that they are always and ever concerned about US. Jesus came preaching, and teaching, and healing, with one primary purpose, to CHANGE THE WORLD AND HOW IT FUNCTIONED. Jesus wanted everything to be different, for his disciples, for the masses that he loved, and for us too. Jesus wanted the humans he was in relationship with to be changed so that they could catch his dream for the world and for humanity. Jesus called the people of his day into community, just as he calls us into community. Jesus knew then and knows now that if people are changed at their very core then community is changed as well, and the ripple of change just keeps on spreading outward until the whole world is transformed, transfigured into a new reality. Do you see it? Can you and I grasp it? The question is very personal – it has to be! Changed? Who Me?

It was just an ordinary day, full of work and people. Another day full of demands and the never ending anticipation of the people that this rabbi, Jesus, and his workers, would bring about something miraculous and wonderful into their often desperate and dissolute lives. There were so many demands and so much to be done, and the disciples were bone tired. Jesus knew this and so he lead by his example. He strode with purpose and determination, up that mountain side. Peter, James and John, followed, hoping that there would be some relief from the crowds and they would be able to rest quietly in the presence of the one they loved so well. They were so tired and troubled too, as Jesus had been teaching some disturbing messages and they needed clarification of what they did not understand. Jesus had been speaking about suffering, and death at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law in Jerusalem. And he talked of resurrection-what ever that was supposed to mean.

Close your eyes for a moment. Let your imagination allow you to actually see the story unfold before you. There is Jesus, strong and sure footed, climbing with purpose up the mountain, occasionally looking back, urging on his followers, maybe smiling and saying a word of encouragement, to help them as their weariness causes them to stumble. And then he reaches the top, the three followers, maybe gasping a little for air, arrive just behind him and as they look toward Jesus, everything about Jesus changes. His face, his

body, his clothes, suddenly shine with such brightness that they can barely look at him. They are blinded by this awesome sight. It was like walking out of a dark room into blazing sunlight. Momentarily, one can not see, until the eyes adjust. And when these disciples eyes adjusted there was not only Jesus standing there but Moses and Elijah. HOW COULD THAT BE? Standing there in what appeared to be flesh and blood were the great prophets of long ago. The prophets whose story of a coming Messiah had been passed down through the ages. Can you see it? Can you feel the confusion and the awe?

Peter is the first to speak. He is trying to make sense of what he sees, and tries to domesticate this Holy, unbelievable scene by doing the practical. "Lord shall I build a shelter for each of you?"

Suddenly as Peter, James and John are trying to wrap their minds around all that they are seeing, there is a thunderous voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" The three are mortally terrified and fall to the ground trembling, because no one survives being in the presence of God. Trembling on the ground, terrified and amazed, Jesus reaches out and touches them, lifting them to their feet, assuring them there is nothing to be afraid of.

Boom, reality is restored, Jesus looks like Jesus again, and Moses and Elijah are gone. The mountain is there below their feet, Jesus begins to descend, and all is as it ever was. What just happened? Was it a dream? What had happened? Why wasn't Jesus explaining it? Why was he just resuming to his everyday way of being? Why was he going back, returning to the crowds that waited below?

It was over. Just like that, as quickly as it had happened, they were following Jesus down the mountain. These three had been given a gift. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, the disciples were given the gift of treasuring the transfiguration in their hearts, the gift of time to ponder and explore its meaning, because Jesus warned them not to speak of this experience until after his resurrection.

So what had changed? Who had changed? Jesus? Peter, James and John? What was different? James and John were changed by their experience. They knew now that there was more to Jesus, more to this life, than what they saw on any given day. Not only did the transfiguration reveal Jesus' glory, but also it was a promise that they too, would become like Jesus – completely changed – completely secure – completely able to go on into this unknown future that had so recently terrified them. These three became early Church leaders. James is believed to be the first martyr, giving up his life for Jesus in the Common Era 44. John became the disciple of love who penned several books in the New Testament. He too was persecuted. Peter, a Galilean fisherman, unschooled became transfigured into someone full of wisdom and knowledge. As an early church leader and New Testament writer, eventually he was martyred for his proclamation of the gospel! Changed? Who was changed?

There are moments in life when our self-satisfaction is shattered and we long to be changed. Hearing this story perhaps draws us to that mountaintop and we long to be filled with such awe in the presence of God. We would love to be outside of ourselves, beyond

our worries and burdens, totally enveloped in God's comforting grace. Something like that took hold of Peter, James, and John, and even though we can't say "they were never the same" because we recall how they fled in fear when Jesus' death came near, some newfound courage later led them all to die the death of martyrs because of their faith in him. Could that new faith have been born on the top of this mountain?

Perhaps our perspective on change has been shaped by Hollywood stories, fairy tales, and the world of make-believe. With memories of those stories in your mind, it is easy to believe that change is magically instantaneous. Snap your finger, sprinkle the fairy dust, touch with the wand and presto change-o! But if you've been on this earth long enough and know yourself and the human condition well enough, you most likely have realized that very seldom is a person changed instantly. Change is a process that can have many beginnings.

Our faith "forms" us. Whenever we gather, we listen repetitively to stories from the Bible, prayers prayed in worship, and hymns we sing or listen to, and the impact of those words chips away at the hard places in our hearts, rounds off the rough edges of our lives, and leads us in a particular direction. Slowly, ever so slowly, sometimes too slowly according to our impatience, we are being shaped in the likeness of Christ, drawn toward the love of God, moulded by the Spirit. We slip and fall away and are picked up and returned to the path by loving friends moved by the grace of God, and the process goes on.

When was the last time you stood on a mountain top, either laterally or figuratively? When was the last time you looked out at God's beautiful creation and knew that everything would have to change if we are to honour this great gift? When was the last time that you looked at the dazzling brilliance of Jesus and his teaching and knew, knew at a very deep level, that YOU would have to change if the world around you was going to change. When was the last time that you knew that there really was nothing to fear, that being transformed yourself would absolutely mean the transformation of YOU and the community to which you belong! WHEN DID YOU KNOW! Changed.... Who me??