

THE VALLEY OF TRANSFIGURATION; LUKE 9:28-36; TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY; 2/7/16; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

I remember, years ago, visiting the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. It is a non-denominational urban church that has a remarkable array of ministries from a retreat center in rural Maryland to a coffee house that is a hub for artists to two apartment buildings for low-income people in a city with astronomical rents.

Each of these ministries resulted from a process the church uses to identify emerging mission – a mission requires at least two persons who share a vision for meeting some critical unmet need or alleviating suffering; their plan is presented to a governing board who, through prayer and fiscal analysis, discern if the church is being called to undertake that ministry.

We visited with the custodian of the housing ministry – a young member of the church with a graduate degree. He talked about the daily reality of maintaining an apartment building: changing light bulbs, fixing clogged pipes, broken windows, and shoveling sidewalks. It's the vision for mission validated by the church and supported by the prayers of the community, he said, that gave him patience and perseverance in an unglamorous job that would have burned him out long ago.

What was intriguing to me was the interdependence of the mission of The Church of the Savior and its worship and spiritual life. One could not exist without the other. The mission, validated by the governing board and vision of the church, drew strength from the worship and spiritual life of the congregation and the worship and spiritual life of the congregation was expressed in and validated by the mission.

Which is the story of the Transfiguration; the disciples and Jesus go up a mountain, encounter Moses and Elijah with whom Jesus confers about his departure that was to come in Jerusalem. A blinding light transfigures Jesus and the entire scene, a voice blesses him and his mission; he leads the disciples down the mountain and into the valley as they head for the Holy City.

You see, the Transfiguration gives Jesus and his disciples not just the long view that enabled them to see where all of this was leading – but it validated the difficult road they are about to embark upon. They are sustained in the valley by that moment on the mountain of God's blessing their work and the instruction to listen to Jesus.

It's the link between mountain and valley, worship and mission, spirituality and outreach that is the key to the life of faith; some call it the inward and outward journey.

Martin Luther, in his study for three days; depressed with his circumstances having started a revolution he did not intend; going deep into his soul, emerging with the tune and text for "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"; sustained and ready to face the authorities who demanded he recant his reforms.

Or John Newton, captain of an English slave ship, hearing the cries of the slaves below deck, searches his soul, prays and then composes the profoundly cathartic, confessional hymn, "Amazing Grace" and becomes a leader of the abolitionist movement in England.

It is black history month. No church understands the connection between worship and mission, between the mountain of transfiguration and the valley of oppression like the black church in America.

It was characteristic of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his cohorts to gather in hot, crowded, tiny black Baptist churches to sing and pray and then sing and pray some more.

Not a few of the white humanistic liberals who eventually joined King in his marches through the South said that's all well and good if you like that sort of thing...but what in the world, they wondered, did the preaching and praying and singing and shouting have to do with the real business of gaining the rights of black people?

I suspect the disciples themselves wondered why Jesus wandered off to quiet and lonely places to just to pray. But it was precisely in those quiet and lonely places as it was in those little black Baptist churches for King and his followers where they found the courage and perseverance, the stamina and energy to continue.

The forces of darkness do not give up with one or two marches; the forces of darkness actually emboldened their attacks in the face of Jesus' preaching and miracles. As one African American pastor said, "that preaching and those prayers and songs kept us going for all those years, and they would be the only thing that would keep us going. Without the power of God, without the vision of God, we wouldn't last long in the battle."

My guess is when our choir sang that stirring African American introit this morning you might have found yourself on a mountain in blazing light or in the deep reaches of your soul; or likewise after the reading when they evoked the bedrock of prophetic faith in that stirring spiritual "Elijah Rock." Friends, that's not entertainment, it's not even merely ethnic music – it is what that music was inspired by and written for – the journey to freedom from oppression in the valleys of life.

There is a deep an undeniable connection between the mountain and the valley, worship and the work for justice.

Somehow Carol and I had the good fortune to meet a man who is a retired mechanical engineer who happens to be a devout Roman Catholic. A few years ago Bob started a small company that repairs and upgrades rental properties. The purpose of the company is to hire and train new immigrants to the United States. Bob has the tools and know-how to equip and educate these new residents of our community to learn a trade, to find employment and to gain stability in their personal lives. Until they launch into the world of construction Bob hires and pays them a living wage.

When he has been in our house over the past several weeks he invariably brings up the topic of the biblical reading from the Sunday before or the Sunday upcoming. He tells me what he found in his priest's homily or in his own biblical reflections, the nuggets of wisdom and faith that keep him going, that apply to his company's mission, and to his life as a grandparent and husband.

The connection between mountain and valley, worship and the work for justice is essential. Years ago when we initiated three adult offerings on a Sunday morning, in my view, our Spiritual Life track was the most essential. While this church had a stellar history and commitment to social justice, I sensed we needed to build up sustain our spiritual reserves – so we started an adult ed. track called Spiritual Life.

More than a few pundits and commentators have noted the grand social justice movements of the 60s eventually gave way to the “me” and “now” generations of the 70s and 80s. The prophetic voices of the anti-war and civil rights movements passed on but no new voices emerged to take their place.

Fewer people came to mass demonstrations and marches. They drifted off the streets and into more private concerns of self-fulfillment, self-discovery, and self-enhancement. One view I tend to agree with is that we, the mainline Protestant church generally, didn't give up because we no longer cared but because we no longer had the emotional or spiritual energy to act. We'd retreated into our minds and deserted our hearts. We were dried up and tired.

But there are signs of resurgence once again – faith and justice leaders are emerging across the nation in Christian mainline and evangelical communities, in Jewish communities, and in Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities, plus we have a Pope who preaches and lives at the nexus of spirituality and mission.

And right here, Friday night at Winterfest, WEDI's annual fund-raiser, we celebrated the ten-year anniversary of the Westminster Economic Development Initiative.

Betsy Mitchell, chair of the WEDI board told how WEDI came to be through the vision of John Perry and Jerry Kelly and the spiritual and financial support of this congregation. We had a collective vision for serving this community in a mountaintop planning experience. There was a point, in the valley, when the WEDI board had exhausted its \$400k, five-year seed grant from this church and John and Jerry signed a promissory note to personally cover any bad loans to new businesses; the only thing holding our bold enterprise together was the spiritual conviction that what we were doing was what God wanted to have happen for the West Side of Buffalo.

The message of the Transfiguration is that worship offers the emotional and spiritual resources to walk through the valleys of this world, and to walk, in this season, through the valley of Lent to the cross of Good Friday.

Worship makes all the difference. We discover transfiguring light in a prayer or hymn or bread and wine; we discover ourselves in the midst of the Holy. We return to an unchanged world, ourselves profoundly changed, yet the same. We have seen the Lord, we've heard a voice, we know not to be afraid.

The strength and relevance of what God calls this church to undertake in the world and calls us to undertake in our personal lives is the result of what happens in this sanctuary each Sunday and in those quiet times and lonely places when we say our prayers and see God's glory.+