

I'll tell you a joke but first please do me a favor. Open your Blue GATHER hymnals to #955, PRECIOUS LORD TAKE MY HAND, and just keep your finger in it during the homily. We'll sing these 3 verses at various points in my homily.

OK, here's my nod to St. Patrick's Day. An Irishman and Englishman walk into a bakery. The Englishman steals 3 buns and puts them into his pockets and leaves. He says to the Irishman, "That took great skill and guile to steal those buns. The owner didn't even see me." The Irishman replied, "That's just simple thievery, I'll show you how to do it the honest way and get the same results." The Irishman then proceeded to call out the owner of the bakery and says, "Sir, I want to show you a magic trick." The owner was intrigued so he came over to see the magic trick. The Irishman asked him for a bun and then he proceeded to eat it. He asked 2 more times and after eating them both, the owner says, "OK, my friend, where's the magic trick?" The Irishman said, "Look in the Englishman's pockets."

This is a fascinating, wonderful, loaded text. The key word is metamorphoo, translated as its exact Latin equivalent, 'transfigured.' Luke surely means for us to interpret this strange event on the mountain as a theophany, a revelation of God, a drawing back of the curtain between the human and the divine. The linkages with the story of Moses on the mountain in Exodus 24:12-18 are unmistakable – the mountain, the cloud, the 6 days (Luke has 8), Moses, the voice, the light. Moses' face shined after being in God's presence, so does Jesus' face. Moses had been called up to the mountain to pray, Jesus had gone up the mountain to pray.

There are connections to worship. Luke says this event occurs "about 8 days" (9:28) after Jesus had predicted His passion, death and resurrection. Early Christians saw themselves as worshipping on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and the Eucharist is a celebration of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

Luke explains that the conversation of Moses, Elijah and Jesus is about Jesus' 'departure,' His exodus (v 31), meaning His passion, death and resurrection. Luke stresses that the Law and the Prophets testify to Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection (Lk 24:25-27, 44-46). The disciples are asleep – which is the predominant apostolic posture in Acts! – so they don't hear the conversation. But they do awake in time for the glory. They also hear the voice, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to Him!" (vss 34-35) (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-Mar 2016, p. 26)

Second, this text is ultimately a story about worship. It's fascinating to read about the demonstrations and marches of the 1960's here in our country. They were described as the worst of times and also the best of times. The Age of Aquarius sang and danced in idealistic, youthful exuberance and assured the troubled world that "all we need is love." Many of the white students may have been misguided and hopelessly naïve in political matters, but they were concerned and involved. That still resonates with our obligation to have a faith for the streets, that faces the concrete needs of others, rather than aloof, in a church, private.

But eventually many of the white folks gave up – not because they no longer cared – but because they no longer had the emotional or spiritual energy to act. They were just plain tired. Oh some stayed, of course. But the African-American community struggled on. The whites had been warned that this could happen.

Why? Because the first thing that Martin Luther King and his cohorts did was gather everyone in some hot, crowded, little black Baptist church and sang and prayed and sang some more. "Well, this was all fine, if you like that sort of thing," thought the good, white, humanistic liberals. But what in the world did this interminable preaching and praying and singing have to do with the real business of gaining the rights of black

people? The white visitors wondered aloud, “Why are we here in the church when we should be out in the streets?”

The leaders explained. “You see, we black folk have been at this thing longer than you white people. We knew that 200 years of evil wouldn’t be eradicated in one march to Jackson. 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 out in the battle.” AND SO THEY SANG: (1<sup>st</sup> verse) PRECIOUS LORD.....

They withdrew for worship so that they might return with renewed perseverance and vision. Something more than eager, beneficent, secular, humanitarian impulses are needed in the struggles of the world.

Which is why the Church always gives us this story on the second Sunday of Lent. It becomes a kind of parable about the inner dynamic of withdrawal and return which is at the heart of Christian worship – our transfiguration into other Christs -- which is therefore at the heart of the Christian life.

Jesus leads His disciples up to a ‘high mountain.’ Everybody from Moses on knows it is the best place to pray – and therefore to receive a vision. The shining face is standard for visions (Ex 34:29-35; Rev 1:16), as are the white garments (Lk 24:4; Acts 1:10, the cloud (Ex 13:21-22; 16:10; Ezek 1:4; 10:3-4; Acts 1:9), and the divine voice (Ex 24:16; Num 7:8-9; Rev 10:4-8).

The disciples react to this strange vision characteristically; they fall on their faces, filled with awe (Num 22:31; Ezek 1:28; 43:3; Dan 8:17; Rev 1:17). What we have here is a classic experience of worship – somebody is coming face to face with God – and they are changed, transfigured, by that experience.

Then comes the cloud, a sign of the presence of God, as it had been in the Exodus. From the cloud a voice speaks, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” echoing that baptismal voice heard when Jesus began His ministry. As at His baptism, for a moment the veil of the present is stripped away to reveal who Jesus is and who He will be. The disciples are now told not only who Jesus is, but also that they are to “listen to Him.”

This strange mountaintop experience of worship happens on the way to the cross. The pace quickens: the end of the drama comes into view over the horizon; a tragedy that will end in death for Jesus and the scattering and disillusionment of His disciples. And, on the way, there comes this mountaintop experience that looks toward the cross and yet transfigures the cross by its burst of light before the encircling gloom.

On the way to the cross, the church withdraws and listens. It overhears the talk between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The shining epiphany comes. The Father confirms the Son’s authority. But when it is all over and done with, when the blessing is given and we go forth, often nothing seems changed. “Was this only a fantasy trip, an escape from the cares of the world into some mystical world of worship?” we ask.

That question has to be answered in each of our lives. Yet, there are many here this morning who would testify that worship makes all the difference. We withdraw upon the mountain in order to return to the valley. We return to an unchanged world, ourselves changed. We have seen the Lord, we have heard a voice, and now we know not to be afraid.

Without such precious times of renewal, withdrawal, and vision, such as God gives us in our times of worship, we would not be able to endure life in the valley, the road on the way to the cross. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-Mar 2016, p. 26-27) AND SO WE SING: (2<sup>nd</sup> verse) PRECIOUS LORD.....

Third, I close with a piece from Henry Nouwen's LIFE OF THE BELOVED. It says what the whole Transfiguration experience of worship – and every act of worship – is trying to say to all of us. I'll read it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural, as Nouwen wrote it:

All I want to say to you is 'You are the Beloved,' and all I hope is that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being – 'You are the Beloved,' .....

Self-rejection is the greatest enemy in the spiritual life because it contradicts the voice of God – the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.' Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence...

We are the Beloved. We are intimately loved long before our parents, teachers, spouses, children and friends loved -- or wounded us. That's the truth of our lives, the truth of our loves. That's the truth I want you to claim for yourself. That's the truth spoken by the voice that says, 'You are the Beloved.' AMEN. (LIFE OF THE BELOVED, Nouwen, page not cited) AND WE SING ONCE MORE: (last verse) PRECIOUS LORD