

Good To Be Here
Transfiguration Sunday
March 2, 2014
Gordon Wiersma

Text: Matthew 17

This sermon began last Sunday during the reading of the Epistle lesson. As I was sitting there by the lectern and Joan Wenke came up to read the passage from I Corinthians 3, I listened attentively, but somewhat routinely, because it was a passage I am familiar with. I don't mean that in some showoff –y way about knowing the Bible so well – it's part of my role as Pastor to study and know the Scriptures; some of you know the Bible far better than I do, and some of you are not so familiar at all – all at different places –that's OK. But anyways, I'm sitting there listening to Joan read from I Corinthians, knowing what it says – Paul talking to the church in Corinth about division/unity first with an image of growing (although that was the week before yet, just to show off a bit more) and then Paul shifts to a building/construction image – I know and appreciate all that, and Joan was just about done, but then she read...

...for all things are yours; whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all belongs to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. This is the Word of the Lord – Thanks be to God.

What? – I grabbed my Bible to take a look! It's not that I mistrust Joan, but I didn't know THAT was in there! – and I know the Bible! I had to look quickly so I could pay good attention to Pastor Jill with the Gospel reading and sermon...but sure enough, there it was! Which both deflated my self-assurance about my biblical knowledge, AND struck me as a remarkable passage:

...for all things are yours; whether Paul/Apollos/Cephas, or the world or life or death or the present or the future: all belongs to you & you belong to Christ & Christ belongs to God.

Hmh! –that’s really intriguing...then I put it aside to listen to Jill, so I could ponder “Beyond Being Right”...which, besides being an excellent sermon I did note was focused on Matthew 5, and NOT on I Corinthians 3, so that’s where this sermon began...

And I want you to know that where that beginning is, appears to me to be an all-mixed together kind of mystical, quantum physics, space-time continuum, mystery-laden location. It talks about all of time, and all things – everything – belonging to you, belonging to Christ, belonging to God. Now I’m not sure what that means, but I know I like it – I think it means something worth listening to. That’s where this sermon begins, but since I Corinthians 3 is not actually a passage for this Sunday, I simply want that beginning to point to where we are in the texts for today, specifically to the story of the Transfiguration as told to us in the gospel of Matthew. Because it turns out that where the Transfiguration story is located, appears to me to be... an all-mixed together kind of mystical, quantum physics, space-time continuum, mystery-laden location! Look at all that is going on: Jesus on a high mountain, a place of spirituality and encounter with God, there with his 3 closest disciples in a mystical setting; Jesus transfigured – shining like the sun, dazzling white, radiant light – mysterious!; Moses and Elijah appear...a bright cloud overshadows, from which a voice speaks: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him” – mystical and mystery abounds. OK – but I also said quantum physics and space-time continuum, right? – what’s that about? Well, it seems important to me that as surreal as this remarkable story may seem to our sensibilities, that we receive it how it is given to us – as an event in the life of Jesus. And so that it is not at all odd for me to wonder about how this can be informed too by the particular knowledge and perspective we can bring in the time we live in, scientifically even.

Let me give an example of that: back in the day at Princeton Seminary in 1987, Tony Campolo came to speak to us students – Tony Campolo is a well-known pastor and theologian; and although not his area of expertise, that day at PTS Tony spoke on how interesting it was to him to reflect on theology and science and to use the resources of science for theology – and he did a bit of quantum physics theology something like this: time is not a constant but rather a relative dimension (Einstein should get credit for that) and connections in the universe are determined not simply by distance but just as much by relationship (that’s quantum stuff), so – therefore – it is plausible to think of God as present to all of time, all of the time; or in other words, to God, all time is always happening; and along with that, we being in relationship to God, are then in a very real sense connected directly to past and present and future.

Alright – so I suspect that is either interesting to you, or makes little sense to you – but in either case you may well wonder how that has anything to do with the Transfiguration. Well, what about Moses and Elijah present there, with Jesus and the disciples? Their presence can be seen as bringing together past – the content of the lives they lived and died; and present – that they are alive beyond death and present to this moment; and even future – that they evoke a sense of being beyond time, with God. It is to me an echo of that I Corinthians 3 passage – ‘all things are yours’ – the presence of Moses and Elijah there on the mountaintop expresses that in the life of Jesus all that has come before is gathered up into God’s presence and purpose; and that what is to come fulfills that purpose.

But I think there’s something important to say here about that connecting of Moses and Elijah to Jesus: that scene is far too often portrayed and interpreted as being about Jesus as some sort of trump card, asserting his top spot in the spiritual hierarchy and supplanting what has come before. But that’s not what you find in this story at all – you see Moses and Elijah in conversation with, here at church we might say ‘in fellowship with’, Jesus; there is no sense here of trumping, but of receiving, of space for true wisdom and community and relationship shared. And I do not think it is making too much of this to say that this image speaks to us of

how we as Christians, as followers of Christ, are called to receive and be in conversation with many things in our world: how to interact with other religions, with our neighbors, even with all aspects of knowledge, of science, claims of truth in our world. Our faith is not a trump card meant to express how superior we are or that we know it all; ours is a faith in which ‘all things are ours’ – which may still be pretty superior sounding, but is actually the faith that God’s Spirit, grace, voice are present in this life and world for us to discern and receive. Our faith is the calling to be about creating not superiority but community, to follow our Lord in seeking not to be over but to be among; it is the calling that there are rich gifts of wisdom and truth to receive in this world, and as Christians our faith calls us to seek and use such truth for the blessing of all.

Alright – that’s one idea from this story. And here’s another, which switches gears abruptly but I hope we’ll be able to see as connected. I want to ask – as we’re told of Jesus transfiguration, dazzling, radiant, luminous – what is happening? is it Jesus’ divinity being revealed or Jesus humanity? – Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God, but what is it that we see revealed here? I have always assumed this is a pointing to Jesus’ divinity, and as you read comments on this story that is almost always what is said – a glimpse of the divine radiance of Christ. But let’s try something different – what if this transfiguration is a glimpse of the full humanity of Jesus? - not an event that separates us from Jesus but that affirms the beauty of our own humanity. Our faith in Jesus as fully human is not so much about tracking his perfection as it is about seeing his complete trust in God, his complete obedience to God’s call, the fullness of his love for God and others (which is the law and the prophets – i.e. Moses and Elijah!) - the full humanity of Jesus is his being fully engaged in the kingdom of God. Jesus has just said he is going to Jerusalem to face the cross, and after this transfiguration that is the journey that begins – isn’t that the radiance of Jesus’ life seen here?

Now Peter, always good for both brilliance and bumbling, in the midst of all this says: ‘it is good that we are here...let me build some lodging for everyone to stay’. And Peter is so right –

it is good to be here – to have a time that renews – a moment to see that all the gifts of life and history and humanity are given to us in God’s presence; to have moments like worship, like love, like relationship, like beauty – moments that transfigure human life into all God created it to be. But what Peter doesn’t quite get is that ‘good to be here’ is not for staying here, but for going there – to brokenness, to challenge, to choice – to the road of the cross. And it is as we too follow that road that we are in community with Jesus’ transfiguration, his faithfulness, his calling – the presence of Jesus in all his humanity to strengthen us; on the way to the cross that we are connected even to the communion, community of saints who have sought to be faithful before us. The Transfiguration reveals what being human is about: ‘human’ is not just a study in inadequacy, it is given by God as a unique capacity for light and life – we see that in Jesus and we are called, gifted, freed to such humanity as well.

This sermon began with ‘all things are yours’, and I think that is where it ends – this Transfiguration picture of history and humanity given to us – ‘all things are yours’: is that heady stuff, delusional stuff, irrelevant stuff? Well, I think it is mystical and mysterious – and there is a place for such in our faith and lives; a mystical place in a most modern way - not to disconnect us from this world, but to be renewed in the truth that we are a part of something not just of ourselves: we are a people of God, of history, of community, of future! It is a grand vision – so grand that it opens our eyes to see the way of the cross as the path it reveals ahead: “This is my Son, the beloved – listen to him” – to Jesus, who says: ‘get up, go, and do not be afraid’ because all things are yours, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. Thanks be to God - AMEN.