

Sermon – Last Sunday After Epiphany

Scripture Texts: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *As we move toward Lent, we are reminded of our call to take up our cross and live faithfully, even in the face of difficulty and hardship – that we might testify to God’s goodness, love, and mercy for those most in need. And, we are also reminded that the journey does not end in the grave, but in resurrection life.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline

1. Sometimes it might be more faithful to die...
 - a. A year after being laid off from my job teaching, I asked to meet with the president of the university.
 - i. He was a former colleague, and someone I had a lot of respect.
 - ii. My goal was not to further protest my layoff, but to share with him my experience and how it reflected on the institution.
 - iii. I told him about how I had sacrificed to serve at Eastern because of my love for the school, about how I had believed in the familial language that was used among employees.
 - iv. And, I told him about how the way in which the layoff was done was deeply dehumanizing, shattering the love and trust I held for the institution.
 - b. To his credit, he truly seemed to hear and engage with me in that meeting.
 - i. He spoke to his grief over the layoffs, and to his sense of regret that he had not been more involved in the process.
 - ii. He had come to see the mistake of entrusting the layoffs to lawyers and to a legal framework that only cared about protecting the institution – and not about the people (the “family” members) who were most impacted
 - c. We spoke about the future.
 - i. I told him about the new calling I was discerning, and he rejoiced with me about God’s faithfulness.
 - ii. We talked about the challenges facing the school, about how many small colleges are likely going to close in the coming years, and about the further changes that might be necessary for Eastern to survive.
 - iii. Near the end of this conversation, I suggested that there are times when it is more faithful to die well than to survive at any cost.
 - d. There is a real tension between those options.
 - i. There are no easy answers! There are lives and livelihoods at stake, and I’m grateful that I didn’t have the responsibility for deciding what path to take.
 - ii. Still, it is worth reflecting on these questions, because every faithful person or institution will face these kinds of choices at some point.

- iii. Martin Luther, the great German reformer, spoke of this tension in theological terms, looking at a theology of glory and a theology of the cross – and I think our readings today help us explore the difference between these theologies.
- 2. A tale of two mountains.
 - a. In our readings, we see two different mountains: Mount Siani and the Mount of Transfiguration.
 - i. At first glance, there is a lot in common between the stories of these mountains. Both see prominent leaders (Moses and Jesus) climbing into the mountains to experience a revelation of God’s glory. Both see companions coming along for the journey, while others are left behind. Both involve clouds and bright lights.
 - ii. But, there are also crucial differences between these two stories.
 - b. Mount Siani:
 - i. God’s glory is revealed, and it is an experience of terror: “the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain.” Later in Exodus, we read that anyone who touched the mountain would die!
 - ii. God gives the law, which is both a source of fear and a source of pride. It serves to set the people apart as God’s chosen.
 - iii. Coming down from the mountain, Moses leads the people in building ark of the covenant and the tabernacle – to contain the terrifying glory of God and to take that glory with them as a source of power.
 - c. Mount of Transfiguration
 - i. Jesus is revealed in glory – still bewildering, but it is also an affirmation of Jesus’ identity and mission. Indeed, Peter recognizes that “it is good for us to be here.”
 - ii. God’s voice is terrifying to the disciples, but it tells them to listen to Jesus. And what Jesus tells them is to not be afraid!
 - iii. Coming down from the mountain, Jesus sets out for Jerusalem, where he will not be separate, but will enter fully into the human experience, facing death on our behalf.
 - d. Theology of Glory vs. Theology of the Cross
 - i. A Theology of Glory emphasizes our accomplishments and importance; in this theology, we seek to be set apart and special, and we expect continual growth & success. To that end, we are willing to use fear and domination as tools. At its worst, this theology is seen in Psalm 2’s language of submission and fear and wrath.
 - ii. A Theology of the cross is different, in that it recognizes the limits of what we can accomplish and calls us to look instead to what God does in Jesus; here, we acknowledge that the ways of God sometimes lead through the valley of the shadow of death, but trust that they do not end there. Rather than using fear, we find comfort from God’s presence with us in suffering. Rather than setting apart a particular and special people, this theology sees the arms of Jesus on the cross spread wide to welcome all people.
 - iii. Before looking at what this means for our lives, it is important to note that this distinction between a theology of glory and a theology of the cross is **not** a distinction between Jewish and Christian theology. God’s love and grace and redemption is found throughout the Old Testament as well as the New, and there are so many Jewish heroes who exemplify these virtues (indeed, even in Exodus,

we see Moses challenge a theology of glory by arguing with God to spare the people after the incident of the Golden Calf). Moreover, Christians have far too often embraced a theology of glory, not least in our history of antisemitism. So, you can find all of the elements of the theology of the cross in Jewish thought – as well as in many other religions; still, as Christians, we look particularly to Jesus as the fullest revelation of God’s love and grace and redemptive purposes for the world.

3. Our call, and our ultimate source of hope

- a. As Christians, we are particularly called to follow Jesus, even when that means taking up our own cross. Sometimes, it is more faithful to die well than to survive at any cost.
- b. Yesterday, I got to attend our diocesan celebration of the life of Absalom Jones (the first Black Episcopal priest), and I believe his life exemplifies a theology of the cross.
 - i. Hope through repeated refusals of his enslaver to let him purchase his freedom
 - ii. Built a community of Black believers at St. George’s Methodist, even fundraising for a balcony, only to be rejected.
 - iii. Formed a congregation that chose to affiliate with the Episcopal church, and was ordained the first priest – yet it would be more than 50 years before the church of St. Thomas would be given full voting rights in the diocese.
 - iv. Led his congregation in ministering to the sick of Philadelphia of every color during the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793, even when most white folks (including doctors!) fled the city.
- c. Rev. Absalom understood the theology of the cross, and his example is one for us to meditate on, especially as we head into the season of Lent this week.
 - i. As easy as it may seem in theory to choose a theology of the cross over a theology of glory, the reality is deeply challenging. A theology of glory is easier and less costly (at least to those in power – it tends to exploit those without power and influence). This is a particular temptation for the American church in this season, as we are offered power and influence through the embrace of Christian nationalism.
 - ii. In contrast, a theology of the cross will sometimes call us to face death faithfully, rather than to survive at any cost. In this time, I believe that it particularly calls us to work for justice and to advocate for mercy on behalf of those in greatest need – especially immigrants and minorities. It calls us to resist fear and practice the radical love and welcome that we see in Jesus, even when such actions come at a cost. But you must also discern your own particular call as you seek to follow Jesus.
 - iii. Exodus tells us that Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days – days in which the people of God waited in fear and bewilderment. We are about to begin our own 40 day journey through Lent. It is a journey oriented around the cross, in which we are invited to self-examination and discernment, even at a cost.
 - iv. But, the good news of these 40 days is that Jesus doesn’t stay on the mountain of Transfiguration. Rather, the revelation of glory on that second mountain empowers him to walk the road to the cross, to go ahead of us into death, and to establish the hope of resurrection. Even as we prepare for Lent, even as we hear God’s call to costly faithfulness, we know that this journey ends not in the grave, but in resurrection life.

Amen.

Notes:

- Theology of Glory Vs Theology of the Cross – This is somewhat of a false dichotomy. Jesus is revealed in glory on the mount of Transfiguration, but that glory is tied to the cross. God’s truest, fullest glory is revealed in the cross and resurrection.
- Peter might get criticized for wanting to build tents, but this is a pretty reasonable idea.
 - In Exodus, Moses was up on the mountain for 40 days! He probably needed a tent!!
 - Also, the result of Moses’ time on the mountain was the building of the tabernacle – a tent for the presence of God to inhabit among the people.
 - This time, however, there is no need for a tent, for God’s glory is being revealed more openly and fully to all the people.
- Alternate opening: Story of Ezra Klein and Ta-Nehisi Coates in conversation after the assassination of Charlie Kirk.
 - Klein had spoken of Kirk as a hero, ignoring his Christian nationalism, and his numerous racist comments (villainizing Dr. King, pretending that Black folks were getting promoted without warrant, insulting Supreme Court Justice Jackson, etc...).
 - Coates called this out in an open letter, and the two chose to speak further on Klein’s podcast.
 - In the podcast, I was struck by how much Klein spoke in terms of “us” vs “them,” and his willingness to do or say anything to sway more of “them” to vote for “us”. He contended that the pragmatics of electoral victory needed to supersede principles.
 - Fascinatingly, Coates responded by arguing from the reality – known especially to Black Americans – that sometimes you fight a good fight only to lose. Coates had a stronger vision for what it looks like to carry on in the face of loss and defeat.
 - Klein was aligned pretty firmly with a theology of glory, while Coates was operating more from a theology of the cross.