

Sermon by The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche  
February 17/18, 2007  
Luke 9.28.2

As many of you know, this Tuesday I returned from a nine day trip to Israel. I might add that I sat in the middle seat both ways, which I believe was doing my part to meditate on the suffering of our Lord. I went with a group of Clergy, both Christian and Jewish along with some other facilitators. It was a pilgrimage that some of you have experienced personally, and one that all of us should undergo at some point in our lives. My journey to Israel, however, was not only about visiting the Holy Sites. We did travel to the Galilee and Nazareth. We saw Jerusalem and the Judean Wilderness. But my trip was really primarily focused on the modern, contemporary Israeli/Arab conflicts in the region, no light easy topic. In fact, the group of 13 of us listened to anywhere from 4-7 lectures a day to gain a better sense of the complexity there and to attempt to reflect on potential solutions. The list of speakers was exhaustive and exhausting. We heard from Israeli Defense Forces who took us on tours of the wall and fence telling us where to stand to avoid snipers. We also heard from Labor Party members, from West Bank Jewish Settlers, from Palestinian College Professors, from Arabs who live in Israel proper, from Palestinian College Students, from a Minister of Foreign Affairs, from a Jewish Doctor who treats Palestinian Patients, from an Episcopal Palestinian Doctor who goes through check-points every day for his work, from a Catholic Bishop and a Melkite Archbishop, from the Chief Rabbi in Haifa, and from Jewish Mothers who experienced first hand the recent war with Hezbollah, from a Sufi Sheik, from a B'hai practitioner, from recent Jewish immigrants to Israel, from a Catholic Nun, from government advisors, from members of the Druze religion who work with lower income children, from Kibbutzniks, from Muslim professors at a teachers' college who seek to empower Arab women, and finally, last but not least, a Messianic Jew. As you might well imagine, I still struggle with how to put the pieces of the puzzle together. I am still processing what I have seen and heard. And, indeed, we were told from the first moment that we arrived that we would be challenged and stretched by the complexities of the area and the peace process. And we were told that we would probably leave confused by those complexities. And we did.

On no day was this complexity more omnipresent than on the day that we arrived in Jerusalem. On that day, before we arrived at the old city proper, we stood on Mt. Scopus, looking down at the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rock. We were taking our postcard pictures of the gold leafed dome. Our tour guide, Reuven had brought some wine. He poured the white wine into plastic cups and passed it around for a toast before we entered this holy city. We were embarking on something amazing together, and we were attempting to share a moment. But as we were toasting and looking at the beautiful city, we began to hear sounds that were like trucks going over steel plates on a New York highway. We looked down and saw the tear gas clouds rising over the Temple Mount and floods of Israeli-Arabs running down the streets. The wine suddenly became a numbing agent instead of a toasting one. And I have since realized that this ironic experience of a toast and tear gas would become a metaphor for our trip. We desperately wanted to celebrate our time in the Holy Land, and efforts on the part of both some Israeli's and some Palestinians to work toward peace, and we were excited to get first hand information instead of what has often incorrectly been handed to us by journalists. But the possibility for what the Holy Land should be, an altogether oasis of peace, always seemed just out of our grasp.

Today is the last Sunday before we begin the 40 day trudge of Lent. Starting Wednesday, we begin to prepare ourselves in body and mind and spirit for the coming celebration of Easter. And on the Sunday before Lent, we always hear the same Gospel reading, that of the Transfiguration. And today, I would like to explore the meaning of the Transfiguration in the context of my recent travels and think about how we might take both into our observance of Lent here.

In today's Gospel, we hear Luke's account of Jesus going up on a Mountain, and we are told that this transfiguring happens about 8 days after Peter has acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the messiah. It is important to note this allusion to prior events. At that time, Peter's realization that Jesus is the Christ was not an easy one. Peter might have understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but he did not understand what being the Messiah entailed. Peter wanted Jesus to march into Jerusalem as a King, to proclaim power and rule as the way that God works. Today's account of the Transfiguration is best understood as an epilogue to this misunderstanding. In the event of the Transfiguration, we see Jesus, James, John, and Peter on the top of a mountain. We see Jesus communing with God, and his face beaming light as a result. And then we hear Peter, immediately, going to his old ideals, wanting Jesus to be more powerful. Peter says, "... let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah". In other words, Peter wants to make a cathedral, a place to enshrine Jesus, a throne, a place similar to the lower case "g" gods. It seems lovely at first. But it is the same misconstrued message as before. Peter wants Jesus to be enthroned and not a servant to humanity. Peter wants Jesus isolated on a mountain, separated from the people, and away from potential harm. Jesus refuses. He goes back down from the mountaintop and sets his face toward Jerusalem where he will openly confront the pain of the world. Jesus puts his hope in love, forgiveness, and serving one another instead of either power or a shrined enthronement.

The implications from this account of what groups of us Christians should be are large. We as churches not only have a responsibility to be places of peace, to be an oasis from the world at the top of a mountain, we also have a responsibility to come down from the mountain and engage the world as Jesus came down after the Transfiguration. In light of the recent conflicts that I have seen and how the possibility of their growing is real, I am also more convinced than ever that the salvation of our world, inspired by the love of God, is also in our hands and is partly our responsibility. And only by coming down from the mountain can we make this world better. Traditionally, in Lent, there is an invitation to individuals to give something up or take something on. It is a way to exercise our spiritual muscles as a means to center us on God. It is a sort of Holy Gym with 40 days of reps, a training ground for something more. This year, I am inviting us all, as a community and as individuals, to by-pass the Holy gym of leaving behind chocolate and soda and move into the place of taking on the applied, actual work of the salvation of our world, both as individuals and as a community with our prayers and with our actions.

For the past two years, this community has reflected on and acted on an urge to reach out to the community around us, to walk down from the mountaintops and to care for others. It was something that was focused on in my interviews here. And we have succeeded in organizing ourselves. We are focused on sharing our resources, both a share of our financial ones and more importantly our other resources of hands, hearts, and bodies. And, the work of reaching out will be our theme for Lent. It ties together the immediacy that I have seen in Israel, the story of the

Transfiguration, and one opportunity for us to be receptive to the coming celebration of Easter. During Lent, we will hear from the youth Group of St. John's, Kingston about an opportunity to reach out to AIDS orphans in Tanzania as organized by this Episcopal Diocese, and in following weeks, we will also begin talking about other volunteer opportunities. In a sense, it culminates when we as a Church go to Mississippi during Holy Week, with 21 parishioners as our representatives.

Although I have not been able to fully comprehend what I saw and learned in Israel, I do know this: In our current world, it will not do to remain isolated in our faith. This cannot be a shrine, even though I hope it is a place of refreshment and peace. We must use it as a launching pad for the love of God. With the Transfiguration, Jesus is changed, Peter's understanding of God is eventually changed, and we likewise are invited to be changed. It is not an isolated event but an opportunity for us to transform how we look at the world, to see a primary value on using our relationships, our countries, our churches, and our homes to be instruments of God's love. One of the more radical speakers for my trip in Israel became somewhat belligerent and asked the question of us, "Why must Americans think that there is a solution for every problem?" A fellow Episcopal priest mused, "Perhaps it is because our culture has been formed in part by Christianity and seeks always to find reconciliation." This is the message of the Transfiguration. We seek reconciliation with one another and with God. And because this message is desperately needed, we cannot enshrine it or hide it. We must seek to live into it and share it with the world.