

Jim Gordon ^[L]_[SEP]Holy Faith, Santa Fe 26 February 2017

Epiphany Last – Year A Exodus 24:12-18 Psalm 22 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

In the name of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the Episcopal Church and many other churches, the Last Sunday after Epiphany is significant because it is Transfiguration Sunday, the Sunday we hear of the Lord's ascent up a high mountain, his meeting with Moses and Elijah, his face shining like the sun and his clothes turning a dazzling white.

The Transfiguration is one of five major milestones in the life of Christ, along with his Baptism, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. Famed Swiss theologian Karl Barth said the Transfiguration is unique in that of the miracles in the Gospels it is the only miracle that happens to Jesus himself.

But while the transfiguration happens to Jesus, the three close disciples he calls up the mountain to witness his this event, clearly have something happen to them as well.

Peter, who is beside himself at what he sees and hears, is the only one who speaks, bursting forth with the idea of building booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. As it says in Luke's version of the story, Peter has no idea what he was saying. Clearly, he is amazed and somewhat frightened. James and John are also, for when they hear the voice of God from the cloud, they fall on their faces.

Because of what we know they will do once they leave this literal mountain-top experience — Peter will continue to misunderstand his master's mission and James and John will seek earthly power in what

they apparently think of as the upcoming Jesus Christ administration — because of that we can't say that as Jesus is transfigured, they are transformed.

But I think we can say that as Jesus is transfigured, they begin to be transformed, that following Jesus' death and resurrection their experience on the mountain — where they saw heaven and earth touch and connect in the person of their Lord — will help them understand the meaning of the cross.

Like that of Peter, James and John, our own transformations, yours and mine, happen over time, and I want to speak now about a word that, I believe, both can express and help effect this transformation.

Strangely enough, there's a popular, secular song that highlights this word.

Eighty verses were written for the song — an indication that the composer wasn't truly content with the lyrics, and I think rightly so. Frankly, they're a mishmash, mixed-up biblical references with very adult subject matter and a less-than-happy ending. In spite of that, this song has been covered by more than 300 performers in a number of languages. In 2004, it was listed as one of Rolling Stone's "500 Greatest Songs of All Time." It's been used in numerous films and television shows. And despite its downbeat ending and its depiction of a failed romance, it's often sung at weddings.

Why?

Well, the composer credits the refrain, and so do I, a refrain composed of a single, repeated word.

[Kathlene Ritch sings: "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia"]

Now, musically — I should defer to Mark and the choir — but it seems to me that the notes, while pleasant, are hardly striking. It is the repeated word itself — the alleluia — set IN the pleasant setting that makes the refrain, and makes the Leonard Cohen song.

So what is it about this word that is so powerful? Well, much like the name Jesus, which means “God saves,” alleluia is more than a word, more than a verbal building block. It’s a message in its own right, and that message is one of praise.

Hallelujah — we use the Greek form alleluia — means “praise Yah,” or “praise Jehovah” or, as we Christians use it, “praise the Lord.”

It appears in the Hebrew Bible in several psalms, usually at the beginning or end of the psalm or sometimes in both places. The Encyclopedia Britannica says that in ancient Judaism it was probably chanted as an antiphon by the Levite choir. In the New Testament it appears four times in Revelation 19.

There is something deeply satisfying about saying and singing alleluia, something deeply satisfying about praising God. Even, I believe, for those who don’t know that that’s what they’re doing when they say the word.

That, I believe, is why the Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujah” is so successful. Think about it: So many people drawn to the sound of praise for God. It’s often said — I talked about this recently — that there is power in the name of Jesus. Well, there’s power in the word of praise for God, power to begin to change hearts, even unknowingly.

At Holy Faith, we use it in any number of hymns, including our three congregational hymns this morning. It’s also in the retiring anthem, which will be sung by the choir. It will be the last word sung this service, which is appropriate, for this Sunday, the last before Lent, we bury this wonderful word, we bury the alleluias.

For the next six weeks we will not sing them; we will not say them. Trust me when I tell you: You will feel their absence, and you’re supposed to.

Burying the alleluias is a tradition that goes back to the fifth century. It's an aural and verbal fast in line with whatever other kinds of fast we might enter into during Lent. We refrain from saying and hearing that joyful sound as we contemplate the Lord's fasting in the wilderness, his suffering during Holy Week and his death on the cross for our salvation. We do this so that the night of the Easter vigil, when the celebrant exclaims that Christ is risen, the alleluia that precedes it strikes us like water in the mouth of a desert traveler.

So this morning, this service, before we begin this fast, savor the alleluias, savor being able to hear and say this praise to the Lord.

Kathlene will sing the four alleluias twice more. In the second four, let us all join in.

[Kathleen Richt sings: "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia" followed by congregation's "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia"]