

Homily – Jesus Reveals God

The Rev. Rob Keim

February 19th, 2023 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

I read a lot and you may remember that last year, in 2022, I decided to stop buying new books and finally read some of the many unread books I already had on my shelves. Last year I read 73 books and 55 of them were not newly purchased. This year, my book reading has gone another directly, and I seem to be rereading books from twenty and thirty years ago. I don't get rid of books, and I have thousands of books that I could reread. Curiously, I don't remember much if anything about some of the books, and rereading them is like reading them for the first time. In twenty to thirty years I have forgotten much of what I have read. At the same time, I have very vivid memories of some of the books, or more specifically, I remember how I felt about the books. And, there are some books that I have reread that no longer hold the appeal that they held thirty years ago. In fact some of them have not stood the test of time, and they are pretty lousy. Obviously the books have not changed but I have. I do not react to books the same way I did thirty years ago. And this is not limited to books. Over the decades I have shifted how I react and think about TV shows, music, and even people. Our heroes are probably different than they were when we were younger, and here is the point I want to make today. Our views of God are also different. As we walk through life our understanding of Jesus changes and this changes our understanding of God. Today, as we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus, I want to remind us that there is probably very little that is more important in our spiritual journey than our understanding of God.

Now, in reality, God is beyond our human understanding, though we like to say that our best understanding of God is through the person of Jesus. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are a window into the being of God. They give us a glimpse of God, but only a glimpse. And, I don't think any of us were around two thousand years ago to have a first hand experience of Jesus so we have to depend on other sources.

As Episcopalians who are part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, we say that we depend on three different sources for our knowledge of Jesus. These sources are based on the three-legged stool that has been attributed to Richard Hooker about five hundred years ago. And the sources are Scripture, tradition and reason.

We use the Bible to understand Jesus, we use the traditions of our Church to know about Jesus, and we use our own personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences to shape what we believe about Jesus. If you have been around the Episcopal Church very long then you will have heard about this three-legged stool, and if you are newer then you now have a useful framework to think about Jesus – Scripture,

tradition and reason. This is a useful framework but it is also the reason that we each have different views about Jesus and by extension differing understandings of God. The Bible actual has not one, but a lot of different understandings of God. And, our Christian traditions are all over the board with beliefs about God. And our personal experiences just add to the mix. Here are a few questions that help reveal the differences we have.

Is God in heaven or is God also in this world?

Can we see God in creation?

Is God active in our world?

Does God allow evil to happen?

Does God punish us for the things that we do wrong and reward us for the things we get right?

What makes the life, death and resurrection of Jesus effective in giving us eternal life?

Scripture helps us understand some of these questions. The traditions of our churches help inform our interpretation of Scripture. And both Scripture and tradition get put through the prism of our lived lives.

Personally, I understand Jesus to be all about love so, I experience God as love. Though I have had some pain in my life, I have had more joy than pain. I have been incredibly blessed by God, so I can express my deep felt belief that God is love. At the same time I also recognize that I live a very privileged life. I live in a first world country, and more specifically in a very beautiful part of God's creation. I have most if not all of my basic needs met and exceeded. I am surrounded by experiences of love. Any hardship in my life is made up of first world problems.

There are many in this world who have a lot more hardship than I have had. Many have a daily experience of violence, poverty and hunger. And, I am amazed that many who experience pain on a daily basis still experience God as love. However, for others this is not their experience. For some, God is harsh and violent. Can you see how our life experiences can shape our understanding and beliefs about God?

Now, today's Gospel reading is what we call the Transfiguration of Jesus. In this story, Peter, James, and John go up the mountain and Jesus is revealed to them in new glorious ways. In this story a voice from the clouds declares that Jesus is not just human. Instead, he is the perfect union of spirit and matter. He is the joining together of human and divine. As the Son and beloved of God, Jesus is the finite point of light , that points back to our infinite God. And what does Jesus show us?

Before the beginning of time and space the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. And with the big bang the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter has expanded across all of time and space. Two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it this perfect union was born into the world as the baby boy we know of as Jesus. And about thirty years later, when they went up into the mountain, the nature of Jesus was revealed to others, and by extension to us. Jesus' role is to hold together matter and spirit inside of one concrete person, who looks totally human, just like us. Jesus of Nazareth tells us that matter and spirit have always been one. But he knows this is hard for us to embrace and understand. So Jesus asks us to see it, struggle with it, and fall in love with it in himself. We get to know and love Jesus, and then we can extrapolate from Jesus, to Christ, that part of God that is in all and around all. And this glimpse of God is first revealed in Jesus so that we can see it in ourselves as well.

This is not an understanding of Jesus that I had thirty years ago. Those of you that have the spiritual practice of journaling can look back at old journals to read your old thoughts and see how you have changed. You can see how you have evolved, and maybe even evolved in your understanding of Jesus. I don't journal, but I do have fifteen years of sermons. I began writing today's sermon as a rewrite of a sermon from ten years ago. Yes, I reread books and I rewrite sermons, and this time as I rewrote an old sermon, I found that I was deleting most of it. My understanding of Jesus has shifted but so has my experience in preaching that understanding. As I preach today, I know that we all have different understandings of Jesus. These are beliefs that has been informed by Scripture, tradition, and our own lived experiences. We are all in different places in our understanding of Jesus and by extension in our experience of God. And that can be a challenge in preaching but it is OK. What we have in common is that our personal understanding of Jesus is a key component to our personal spiritual health and vitality. We are all in different places in our understanding about Jesus and God and that is OK because we are all journeying towards God.

Now, we free ourselves to have more conversations about God when we accept and celebrate that there are a variety of understandings about God. We free ourselves from the fear that we might say something wrong about God. We free ourselves from the fear that we might reveal something about ourselves that others will pick at. We free ourselves from the fear that we have stepped away from someone else's dogma. And, when we are free from these fears we can actually talk more with others about Jesus and God. And, that is good for our spiritual life. This is my challenge to you this next week. Be free to talk with others about God, and be free to talk to them about what you really understand about Jesus.