

“Steeped”

(Luke 9)

Last Saturday, before the fresh layer of snow this week fell upon the shrinking snow banks and patches of brown grass showing beneath the shelter of trees, I climbed up into the rafters of our garage and pulled down the plastic sleds for the kids. We went over to Roosevelt Elementary, and that subtle, gentle and just my speed kind of hill. I was watching as Ethan tried to make his way up the glassy surface of snow that had partially melted and re-froze as Olivia tried to make her way up the slender strip of mud that was made by countless children who had already trudged up the hill making an easier path. At one point, within a matter of seconds, each slid, slipped and fell flat. Ethan sliding down still holding onto the rope of his sled as it followed in his wake; Olivia with the entirety of the right leg of her bright pink snow pants now colored brown and caked with mud. Within a matter of seconds, however both were back up on their feet determined to make it to the top. We all settled onto a sled again and I – less than gracefully plopped myself down behind Olivia – we all raced to the bottom with a reckless glee filling the air all around us. As we skidded to a stop, a bit breathless and laughing out loud, I realized that that moment, at the very bottom after the wind had whipped and nipped at our noses and cheeks, when the blur of our surroundings ceased and we got our bearing back that we’d left at the top of the hill; it is that joyful moment that makes the climb, the slipping and sliding and stumbling all worth it.

I wonder how long after the disciples came down from the mountain, when they got their bearings back and everything they had witnessed at the top slowly sunk in that they finally told someone. It makes sense for them first to share in soft whispers with the other nine disciples; gauging their reactions when they told how Jesus was transformed before their very eyes. I mean, what are friends for if not to help you sort out those odd, unable to wrap your mind around, others might think you’ve lost it kind of moments?

I am not sure what to make of the transfiguration. My rational, left brain thinking wants to suggest this is nothing more than a misplaced resurrection narrative; something crafted years afterwards by the gospel writers as a good story telling method of foreshadowing what happens on Easter Sunday, a sort of tease their listeners and to us today with a taste of what we will hear seven Sundays from today when the trumpets blare and the aroma of lilies fills the sanctuary. But I feel a bit short changed sometimes by such intellectualization of scripture. I mean just because I convince myself of this logic, does that mean it’s the only way, or the “right” way to make sense of and find meaning in the transfiguration? And that question opens just enough room for the right, creative thinking side of my brain to kick in saying maybe the transfiguration is not something to comprehend, but a reminder of God’s mystery; that which is always drawing us in but eluding our full grasp. I mean it’s like willingly contorting your body onto a thin, plastic sled without power steering or breaks, pushing yourself off a perfectly level and stable hill to race down a slick surface risking life and limb in the process, it doesn’t make logical sense, and yet like sledding, stepping into the mystery of God can awaken our whole being in ways that staying safe at top never would.

The transfiguration is a moment of awakening. The disciples experience and encounter first hand, in a way they can hardly wrap their minds around, just how close they are to the sacred. Now, to be sure, I prefer to and do spend too much of my life in the camp with the Israelites we heard from Exodus. This is the place where the sacred is veiled and

controlled. The Israelites saw Moses' face shining, aglow, and it is simply too much. They beg Moses to cover his face and keep their distance less they get swept up in or swept away by the sacred. They recognize that being too close to God changes us in ways we cannot control or predict or squeeze into our schedule when it's convenient. So, instead, Moses continues to serve as an intermediary, going between God and the people; up the mountain, down the mountain, back and forth, a holy message service. I think in some ways that kind of indirect, held at a distance kind of spirituality and faith appeals to us. The kind of up close and personal encounter with the sacred that both Exodus and the gospel describe is not one that many of us are willing to share with others when we encounter a moment that makes us feel a bit edgy or unsure or can't explain or can't shake the goose bumps sitting on our souls.

And yet, there are times when the veil is dropped, if only momentarily, when we come face to face with the sacred. I felt that this week. On Monday, Ethan brought home a reading folder. And nestled close to me on the couch, Ethan read. And while it wasn't words like 'transfiguration', it was no less than an encounter with the sacred. On Thursday, when I dropped Olivia off at school and while waiting in line she crawls into the front seat and we share a few minutes joking back and forth, it is no less than an encounter with the sacred. When Gina and I talk about hopes and dreams and realities, it is no less than an encounter with the sacred. To be sure, faces may only shine with smiles. To be sure, the only striking light might be from a flicker candle. To be sure, we don't usually classify such moments as sacred; but for me they hold a holy kind of power that can actually cause me to change my life. The transfiguration changed the disciples' lives. No longer was the sacred some distant, far off, intellectually interesting and intriguing noticing; the sacred was right there in their very midst. No longer did Jesus need to be like Moses and gopher back and forth between the disciples and God; God speaks directly to the disciples; telling them to listen to God's beloved.

The season of Lent that we begin this Wednesday is about a time set aside, it is a time to listen. To listen for the wisdom of scripture, to listen for that first brave song bird to return with promise of new life, to listen to each other, to listen to ourselves, and especially to listen for the sacred. Listening and Lent are woven together; listening and Lent can guide us and take a central place in our lives right now. There is no more football to be watched; there is no special baking or parties to plan or decorating we need to do; there is only forty plus days to prepare our hearts for Easter and forty plus days where each moment our soul can be steeped in the sacred. To be sure, the weather outside and the history of dirges within the church weigh the season of Lent down with more baggage than any of us could every carry. So friends right now drop the net of thinking that Lent is just about guilt or feeling bad or giving something up or praying more or trying to be more holy; and instead follow. Follow the one who beckons us, follow the one who invites us up the mountain where there are slippery and muddy spots; where we will need to grab onto each other at moments to steady ourselves in the coming weeks and where there will be moments where we stumble. Let us follow the one up the mountain who captures our souls and will not let our lives go.

So may you prepare for this Lenten journey like you would any other journey? May you prayerfully think about what you need to take along for the next forty days and what you need to leave behind? May our church move into an understanding of Lent where laughter is required, hugs are mandatory, sharing love is a given, and most of all traveling together in the ups and downs of the next seven weeks is what it is all about. May the unfolding forty days of Lent steep you in the sacred, awaken you to the presence of God moving in our midst, and

challenge each of us to respond fully with lives that reflect and radiate God's grace and love for all creation. Friends, may God grant you and all of us as a community together a holy and blessed and even more joy-filled than sledding kind of Lent.

Thanks be to God. And let the people of God say, 'Amen.'