

Last Epiphany C 2019

Exodus 34:29-35

2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2

Luke 9:28-36

How do you know when a vision is real?
Can you trust what you glimpse
In those rare moments when the veil lifts?
Do you know the truth
When you hear it or see it,
Touch it?

How do you know when a liar is telling the truth?

Between the crooked lawyer
Testifying before congress,
Expressing remorse
And sounding a warning,
And the world leaders
Emerging from a failed summit meeting,
Walking away from whatever slim chance there was
Of a meaningful agreement,
So many leaders parading and posturing,
It has been hard to look away from the news,
And hard to find any news
In which to take hope or heart.

This week –
Well, this year,
This time,
We have been flooded with stories
That shake our trust,
Rouse our righteous indignation,
Perhaps tempt us to despair.

More climate degradation.
More human trafficking.
More hunger,
More gun violence.
More abuse of power
Of every kind.

Stories about power and personhood,
About exploitation and deception,
About loyalty and values,

About how we give our hearts away,
How we let our judgment go.

These are stories
That test our values
And haunt our dreams.
That shake our faith in who we are.

These are stories
That could tempt us to despair.

And that is the heart of the matter.
That's why
This moment could be a place
Where we relive
The splendor of the mountaintop,
The secret revelation,
The flash of truth.

This moment in our lives
could be a place of transfiguration.
This could be a place
Where the veil might part
And glory might shine through.
If we let it.

It could be a place
where we renounce shameful things
And enter into freedom.
Where, with unveiled faces,
We see God's glory.

For now, a veil lies over us all.
A veil of concealment,
A veil of blunders and betrayals,
A veil of doubt.

Allegations,
Misrepresentations,
Shame, fear,
Abuse of power,
Misguided loyalties,
Our stories unwind
And slog their way through
a morass of broken trust and lapsed responsibility
Day by day

In a way no fiction writer
Would think to invent.

I don't know how it will all turn out.

I do know this:
If God is not here,
On the front page of the newspaper
Day after day,
Hidden in the broken trust
And grasping overreach
Then God is not among us.

And God is, now and always, among us.
So God is somewhere in this moment.
Even this sordid seamy moment.

If we can look through the veil
With the eyes of prayer
We might see God lying in wait,
God waiting for the transformation
That will make us real.
God just waiting to enter our broken culture
Where mistakes are made
And choices happen haphazardly.
This the very place
Where God wants to be known.

God specializes, after all, in crazy, starved places,
People who have run out of choices.
Slaves in Egypt.
Subjects in occupied territory.
Outcasts and sinners.
Prisoners on a mission.

God specializes in veiled places.
And God starts working
When the veil is lifted
And someone sees.

Someone like Moses.
First, he caught a gleam,
A hint of God shining through the ordinary
Become extraordinary.
Remember that part of the story?
A bush on fire,

But not consumed.
Next, he asked to see God's glory,
And hid in the cleft of the rock,
As God passed by.
Then, fire and cloud
And thundering voice,
And the encounter with God
Left its mark on his face,
Shining like the sun.

His unveiled face
Showed the power and the wonder
Of an encounter with the God who is among us,
Summoning and cajoling us
Towards a life of obedience,
Of justice,
And at last, of love.

The veil lifted for Moses.
And for Paul.
Remember that part of the story?
HE came to faith
In a flash of light
That blinded him to all but the glory of God,
And taught him to find God
In the last place he would ever have looked –
On the cross.

The veil lifted for the disciples,
Sleepy on the mountaintop
When they saw their friend,
Transfigured in prayer,
And knew in a flash
That his radiance
Was the glory of God.

Moses was a murderer
And fugitive from justice,
And the encounter with God
turned him into a lawgiver.

Paul was a persecutor of the innocent,
Breathing threats and murder,
To use his own words.
And the encounter with God
Turned him into an evangelist,

Gentle as a nurse,
Again, to use his own words.

If the encounter with God
Can work that kind of transformation,
Couldn't it happen even here?

Could the veil part
And the glory of God shine through?
Could God's glory shine out of the front page?
Could our most reviled public figures
Be transfigured before us,
Becoming, if not paragons of virtue,
Human beings,
Made in the image and likeness of the living God?

I don't know.
I could be tempted
To imagine a story
In which the clouds part,
And light shines down,
And all the actors in our sordid play turn to God
And there is rejoicing in heaven.
But I won't.

We can't make anyone else
Offer themselves to work of transformation,
offer the space between them
As a place where God can be at work.
We can only offer ourselves.

And that's a risky business,
Because this is my story, our story,
As well as theirs.
If it were all about someone else,
It wouldn't have such life for us.
We all make bad choices,
Misplace our loyalty,
Shun our responsibility.
Our bad choices may not be as grotesque
As some of these,
Our judgment may not always be so poor.
But we hide beneath the veil as well.

What makes the change?
When does the veil lift?

When does transfiguration shine forth?

It is prayer that lifts the veil,
Prayer that transfigures and then transforms us,
Prayer that invites God into the story,
Prayer that leads us to new choices.

When I see the newspaper,
When I hear the endless blather on the radio,
I can choose.
I can choose
To sneer and salivate,
Which is so tempting
And so satisfying.
And so revealing.

Or I can pray, and so touch the corner of the veil --
The veil, anything that stands between us and truth.
I can touch the corner of that veil,
The veil of what shows,
What we choose to live by,
What we think is real,
I can touch the corner of the veil
And pray.
You can lift the veil, and see.

Show us your glory, we can pray,
Even if it changes us
Beyond our imagining,
Changes us and makes us free.

Transfigure us, we can pray.
Show us your glory
In all the actors in the drama of these times,
Because they bear the image of your likeness,
Waiting to be revealed.

This story is unfinished,
Messy,
Nasty.
It has the hallmarks of human weakness and blundering:
exploitation,
Mistrust,
Failure of leadership.
I cannot see in it any promise,
Or hope.

But I trust,
I must believe, God is there.
Here.

Because God is a God of yearning,
Of suffering,
Of unfinished and messy business
Where we can see no hope.
It is not the face of peace and joy only
That shines with the light of God's presence.
God's face is a face of loss and longing too.
And there is plenty of that
To go around.

God is not waiting for perfection
Or justice or peace
Before sharing the divine self
With us in all our messy weakness.
God is only waiting for an invitation,
Only waiting for us
To say the words.
Show us your glory.

This story of transfiguration
Is the prelude,
Not to glory,
But to Lent.

It is before his suffering and death
That Jesus is revealed
As the bearer of God's glory.
It is on the road
That leads to the cross
That Jesus lets himself be known:
Known,
Haltingly, halfway,
To his bumbling, earnest friends
Who want to do right,
And cannot fully understand.

If he can be known
On the road that leads to the cross,
Surely he can be known
In these stories that won't quit.

This is precisely where God wants to be.
In the middle of the mess.

Let it happen.
When you look at the newspaper,
When you listen to the radio
Or glance at the TV,
Say, God is a God of yearning,
Of struggle,
A God who has never yet
Shunned a mess.
So I know that God is here,
Waiting to be known,
Not when the mess is fixed,
But when the mess
Is welling up all around us.

God is here, waiting for us to see,
And to be transfigured by what we see:
The cloud of glory,
the divine among us,
And the road that leads to the cross,
And beyond.