

Sunday, February 7, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 9:28-36

Awake

Transfiguration Sunday: the last Sunday before the Pancake Supper—I mean, the last Sunday before Lent, the last Sunday of Epiphany. In the gospel reading, Jesus is transfigured, his face and his clothes start shining, become dazzling white. And then Moses and Elijah, who are dead, appear and start talking with Jesus. You may be forgiven for thinking that this sounds odd, almost like a dream. As the gospel writer Luke describes it, there's something of a dreamlike quality to the scene. In fact, distinctive to Luke's description of the transfiguration is a detail about the disciples, what they are doing when Jesus starts shining, Luke writes, "Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but since they had stayed awake..."

"Weighed down with sleep..." what an evocative—and accessible—phrase we have there. We might have trouble identifying with this scene of transfiguration, but we can probably identify with being weighed down with sleep. Who hasn't felt that heaviness, that cottony feeling in your head, that fog that comes when you have not gotten enough rest? I've been talking recently with some mothers of newborns, and I was reminded of how prevalent that feeling is those first few months, when sleeplessness is your life. The baby dozes and so then you do, too, you sink into sleep, only to be roused from it ever too-soon. It might be midnight, you may have just entered the deliciousness of deep sleep, but that doesn't matter to the baby. Your baby looks at you, bright eyed and eager—and awake. My daughter Ruth was notorious for that as an infant. I remember little weeks-old Ruth looking at me, wide awake in the middle of the night, big eyes barely able to focus but definitively open. I can clearly remember seeing her like that, though much of the rest of the first months of motherhood are a haze. So tired, half awake and half asleep, half the time I didn't know what I was saying.

That seems to me to be just the state the disciples are in in Luke's rendering of the Transfiguration, they're half asleep and half awake, and not quite sure what they're saying. Peter says, somewhat oddly, "Let me make three dwellings." Luke explains, "he didn't know what he was saying." When I am weighed down with sleep, that's me too. The disciples are tired, confused, enveloped in a cloud. Literally. They're not just foggy in their heads, there's a fog all around them. A cloud comes down and overshadows them.

But here's the interesting thing about this cloud: it's not a cloud of confusion, it's a cloud of revelation. This cloud reveals who Jesus is, clearly, audibly: a voice speaks from the cloud: "This is my Son!" There's such clarity to it. It's like the clarity of a new parent, a clarity that can come, even in the midst of a waking fog, late at night, looking at your baby, you see, you feel a sudden sense of clarity and conviction, a love that transfigures, a love that dazzles. This is my child.

God says on the mountain of Transfiguration, "This is my Son!" We've heard something like that earlier in the gospel of Luke. This last Sunday of Epiphany, we recall the beginning of Epiphany, when the gospel reading was Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven spoke, too. God said to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved." Today, on Transfiguration Sunday, God says it again, for everyone to hear, "This is my Son!" God' says, to our sleepy selves, "This is my Son," and then adds—in case we're still half there, God adds, as a shoulder shake, "Listen to him!" "Wake up!"

Wake up to who Jesus is, wake up to what Jesus does, all of which is inscribed into the story of Transfiguration. Jesus' shining face? Like Moses, coming down Mt. Sinai. The cloud? Like the pillar of cloud, that led the people of Israel, after their escape from slavery. Jesus' conversation with Elijah and Moses? The conversation was about Jesus' "departure," literally, the word is Jesus' *exodus*. Even that seemingly odd suggestion from Peter, the one about making dwellings—the Jewish festival of booths, or dwellings, commemorates the Exodus. Jesus' transfiguration shows who he is, and what he does. Jesus comes to wake us up, and more, so much more, Jesus comes to set us free.

There is so much from which we need to be set free. There is so much that weighs us down—not just lack of sleep, but lack of trust, lack of hope, lack of love. Sadly, maybe even more than sleepiness, these are familiar feelings: lack of trust, and lack of hope, and lack of love. Even more than sleep, they weigh us down: Our lack of trust in elected leaders, and leaders to be elected, the whole political process. Our lack of hope in our places of employment, in the prospect of employment, will there be a job for me? Can this organization survive? And our perhaps most painful lack, especially in light of its preeminence to our lives as Christians—that reading from 1st Corinthians 13 last week—this most painful lack: our lack of love, our lack of love in the way we treat one another.

Lacking these things makes us half there, lessens our ability to think and act and speak, we don't know what we are saying. Lacking these things does not make us lighter, it weighs us down, puts us in chains. We are still not free. We remember this, this month of February, Black History month. As we honor the heritage and contributions of African Americans, we remember how weighed down our country is, still is, by the slavery of racism. We are weighed down by prejudice; we are weighed down by a distrustful, hopeless, loveless world; and we can be weighed down by yet something else, too, by a voice—a voice inside. It's not just the world outside that says it's all for naught. We can be weighed down, by our own internal voice, telling us we are worthless.

But that voice, is not the voice of God. God's voice says just the opposite, to us. God says it to us through Jesus. God comes to set us free from chains of all kinds, internal ones too. God comes to set us free. That is what God does, has been and is always doing. God freed Israel, and Moses, too. When God appeared to Moses, and told him he would lead his people to freedom, Moses said, "I don't think I can do that. I'm not much of a speaker." God said, "I'm telling you, you are going to do it." And, "I'll get you a helper." God said that to Moses, in blaze of light. God said, "I'm talking to you. You're the person I need. You. And I'll give you helpers." God says that to us, just as God said it to Moses. God says it to us in our baptisms, God looks at us with clarity and conviction, says, "You are my beloved child. You are my beloved children." And, "You are free. Now, go. Transfigure the world."