

Sermon: The Burning Self**Scripture: Mark 9:1-9****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: February 11, 2018**

Rabbi Cari is our local Rabbi from Shir Tikvah up the road. She and I had coffee this past week to talk about a joint concert that we are hosting here in honor of Yom haShoah. The afternoon of April 8th, a week after Easter, a chamber music group will play music honoring and composed by those who died in the Holocaust. One of the pieces ends by instruments dropping out and is never completed because the composer died before he could finish the score. It'll be a beautiful evening so we hope you'll put it on your calendar.

In any case, I sat down across from Rabbi Cari at Starbucks and asked if before we got into talking about the event I could get her Jewish theological hit on the story of the Transfiguration that you heard Liz just read. Not surprisingly she hadn't heard the story before which made it particularly interesting to hear her reflect on it. "If the writer has placed Moses and Elijah beside Jesus like that," she said, "then he's making the point that the new age has arrived, the Messiah who is the embodied fulfillment of the law and the hope that the prophets point to, is there in Jesus."

She reminded me that at Passover Jews always set a place for Elijah and pour him a glass of wine in anticipation for his return because when he returns the end of time will have come and God's kingdom will be established. The wine is poured in the glass on the table to represent just how imminent their hope is. "Moses on the other side of Jesus," she went on, "would suggest that Jesus fulfills the law." The Law of Moses

was given to show how the Jews were suppose to live until the coming of the Messiah, the final fulfillment, and so Moses' presence would suggest that in Jesus the law has been fulfilled, the Messiah has arrived.

She asked about Peter and his suggestion to build shelters, if he might be a figure in the Gospels who represents the struggle in the Christian community between being told that in Jesus everything has been fulfilled and yet still holding to old practices. I told her she was exactly right because later in the Book of Acts it's Peter who has the vision of the animals that are pronounced clean by God even though in Jewish law they had been declared unclean. So again, the idea here is that the new age has come in Jesus Christ, the old no longer holds sway, but actually letting go of the old and embracing the new is the work.... And all of this over a triple vente half caff soy latte! But that's it - that's what is happening on that mountaintop and it wasn't lost on Rabbi Carinor would it been on any first century Jewish listener to Mark's story.

So here we are at the culmination of the season of Epiphany, the season of revelation of who Jesus is and here just before we descend into Lent, the end game is revealed: the fact that in Jesus all, the law and the prophets, history itself is completed and fulfilled. Just before Jesus enters into his passion, his suffering and death, his closest disciples - and we vicariously - get this gift of a vision on the mountaintop about Jesus' true nature. The disciples needed desperately to have this little foretaste reminder because what is about to happen to Jesus is bad enough to throw even the most loyal and courageous of disciples off course. So as we enter Lent, a time of self-reflection and repentance, a time of spiritual disciplining of oneself, we get this foretaste of the

Easter moment to come when the divine life shines through the human form. We begin this Wednesday with the black ash of Ash Wednesday smeared on foreheads and hear the words “from dust you have come, human, and to dust you shall return” and it all culminates with the radiant light of Easter when we hear the words “Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed!” In between are the 6 weeks of Lent when we are invited to participate in the process between the two poles. Traditionally that involves more intentional prayer, fasting of one sort or another, practicing confession and penance, and a renewed commitment to almsgiving or care for the poor.

It’s a season of spiritual deepening and attentiveness that ideally reminds and reinforces the truth that we are not spectators of the Jesus story but participants in it. We pray or fast or repent or give of ourselves to others in new ways during Lent as a way of better getting at the truth of our own divine son-ship or daughter-ship in God. We don’t just watch or worship Jesus Christ from the sidelines, we dig in and open up to the truth that Christ is within us and we are in Christ so that we too, like Christ, might become radiant with divine presence.

Peter, you see, was in spectator mode when he saw Jesus radiating light and asked if they should build 3 shelters for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. The old structures of religion were lodged deeply in him with the temples and synagogues, the laws and regulations for right living, all being the appropriate response to a revelation of God. He was in burning BUSH mode while Jesus was in burning SELF mode. Remember when Moses encountered God on the mountaintop there was the burning bush through which Moses heard the voice of God and was told

the no-name of God - I Am Who I Am - but that was there and Moses was here and God was distinct and separate from him but in relationship.

On this mountaintop though, while there is clearly a reflection of Moses' mountaintop experience, there is one critical difference. God is no longer separate and distinct, out there, but rather Jesus becomes radiant himself with God's divine presence. As a result we no longer have to build temples to worship a high God or claim a holy land to be closer to a distant God or adhere to strict guidelines to be obedient to a demanding God, but rather we are to realize our divine birthright ourselves, to awaken to our Christ-within. We are to become the burning bush rather than kneeling before it!

"Get up off the ground Peter," Jesus says to him, "let's go." Just like he'll say to the disciples at the Ascension - "why are you looking up into the air, get into Jerusalem, we have work to do." Or to Paul in the resurrection appearance - "get up off the ground Paul, go into Damascus, we've got work to do." And Paul will say and encourage in us this new reality - "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me!" It's a remarkable shift that takes place - no more bowing to a deity outside of us, much less sacrificing people or animals to that deity, now it's about awakening to the deity, the image of God within us and we become the temple, how we live our lives is the devotion and we are the living sacrifice, for God's sake!

So the season of Lent then is better understood, maybe, as not so much becoming more obedient to God, or mortifying the lowly flesh to please the high God, or repenting before an angry God, but rather it is about clearing away the internal clutter of the small ego self to better

access the truer, deeper divine self, the Christ within. Prayer, fasting, repentance, almsgiving are tried and true practices to get at the divine image within, which is at times smoldering there and needs oxygen so that it can become a flicker and then a flame pouring forth love and grace and healing power in the world!

You see, let me reiterate this because it's not the way we are used to hearing the story - Jesus, Moses and Elijah are on a mountain. Jesus becomes the burning bush through the total and complete offering of himself to God and to others. Through our beholding of this burning bush this burning divine presence of Christ, the Christ-within is set ablaze in us and we then become our truer burning selves, radiant with divine being and warming the world with love.

Lent is a time to sweep out the ashes of our small, hardened, tight, withered, lesser selves to make room and space for the truer Christ presence to catch fire. What needs sweeping out in your life and what spiritual practice or discipline might facilitate that sweeping? What can you give up or what can you take on in these next six weeks that might help remind you and help you access that divine image ember within you? It is there, beautiful and untainted, burning deep and true beneath the fear or the pain or the numbness or the ill-health in your life, just awaiting your consent to give it a little spiritual oxygen so it can blaze forth so YOU can be a radiant light for all the world?