

The story of the Transfiguration, our gospel lesson this morning, concludes the Epiphany season just like the Resurrection ends the Lenten season and begins the Easter season. It is a strange story of sorts as Jesus and three of his disciples climb to a mountain top and then Jesus is visited by Moses who lived about 1,200 earlier and Elijah who lived about 800 years earlier. Moses was the great liberator and law giver whereas Elijah was a great prophet in Hebrew history. I would like to focus on three items in our gospel narrative to help us understand what is happening in this event and bring some insight for our day to day living.

First, I think the reference to eight days in the opening verse speaks to our sense of identity in life. Second, the vision of Moses and Elijah calls us to review and maybe alter our lifestyle. Finally, the reference to the disciples straining to keep their eyes on Jesus as they fight off sleep anticipates our enormous potential in life.

Identity

It seems that a college student needed a small two-hour course to fill his schedule. The only one that fit was in Wildlife Zoology. He had some reservations as he heard the course was tough and the professor a bit odd. But it seemed like the only course that would fit in his schedule so he signed up. After one week the professor had a test for the class. He passed it out and it was a sheet of paper divided into squares and in each square was a carefully drawn picture of some bird legs. No bodies, no feet---just different bird legs. The test simply asked the student to identify the birds from the pictures of their legs.

Well, he was absolutely floored. He didn't have a clue. The student sat and stared at the test and got madder and madder. Finally, reaching a boiling point, he stormed up to the front of the classroom and threw the test on the teacher's desk and exclaimed, "This is the worst exam I have ever seen and this is the dumbest course I have ever taken." The professor looked up at him and said, "Young man, you just flunked the test." Then the professor picked up the paper, saw the student hadn't even put his name on the paper, and said, "By the way, young man, what's your name?" At this the student bent over, pulled up his pants, revealed his legs and said, "You identify me."

Discerning identity can be hard sometimes. The "eighth day" reference in our gospel lesson is a subtle clue that this narrative is about identity. The "eighth day" conjures up the service of circumcision in the Jewish mind. Remember Luke 2:21: "And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus."

Circumcision was a mark of identification for the Jews at the time of Jesus' birth and had been so for over 1,500 years (Genesis 17). Therefore, this is a story that reveals the identification of Jesus and his disciples, past and present. Jesus is seen, in the Transfiguration, as one who fully embraces the Law of God given by Moses.

What does that say to us about our identity? Followers of Jesus, then and now, are identified as people who live within intentional boundaries that emerge from the spirit of the Ten Commandments. Guidance for living, what our Hebrew ancestors called the Law, is found in the Ten Commandments as well as in many contemporary principles emerging from fields like psychology, philosophy and ethics.

The question regarding our Christian identity is this: People might not be able to recognize us from our legs but can others identify you and me as Christians by the manner in which the "Law of Moses" and "Ways of Jesus" define us. Living in the spirit of Jesus is walking through life with an intentional identity.

Lifestyle

Identity provides guidance to our lifestyle. The presence of Moses and Elijah in the Transfiguration narrative provides some definition to the general emphasis a disciple of Jesus tries to maintain in his/her lifestyle.

Please remember that Moses and Elijah had been gone from the earthly scene some 1,200 and 800 years respectively when Jesus lived. Let's look at the symbolic meaning of their presence with Jesus on the mountain top.

Their presence points to lifestyle aspects for a person of Christian faith. Understanding what "the Christian lifestyle" encompasses has varied historically and presently. One can look at the Amish and other like-minded faith communities who reject most cultural developments as hindrances to living a faithful life. On the other end of the spectrum, United Methodists and other like-minded faith communities have members who initiate and utilize cutting edge developments.

On the whole, United Methodists embrace developments in various aspects of life and attempt to understand them through the lens of faith. An example of United Methodist perspective on life and its developments is the Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church. Duly elected lay and clergy representatives revise this document every four years at General Conference. Our own Esther Hay will be part of this process this spring as the General Conference of the United Methodist Church meets in Portland, Oregon. The Book of Resolutions, over 1,000 pages, provides us with biblical and theological insights and guidelines on the Natural World, the Nurturing, Social, Economic, Political and World Communities. The Book of Resolutions is our formal attempt to define the spirit of the great law-giver Moses and the prophetic statements of Elijah that Jesus embraced in his life.

As Christians we attempt to live in the spirit of our ancestors of faith although we acknowledge that various faith communities vary in their understanding of the "Christian lifestyle." Basic to Christian lifestyle is embracing the spirit of the "Law of Moses" in our daily interactions. In addition, basic to Christian lifestyle is embracing the spirit of the prophetic tradition that seeks justice and equity for all. Elijah's presence in the Transfiguration narrative represents the prophetic tradition and Jesus and his followers, past and present, embrace justice and equity for all in our lifestyle orientation.

Justice and equity issues are a part of our daily interactions. At a particular party a doctor who was chatting with a lawyer was interrupted by a man who insisted on telling the doctor about a pain in his leg and asking her what to do about it. The doctor advised him, then, after he went away, she asked the lawyer, "Do I have a right to send that man a bill for my professional services?" The attorney replied, "Certainly." The next day the doctor sent the man a bill. She also received a bill---from the lawyer. Justice and equity touches all parts of our life!

Potential

Our identity and lifestyle as disciples of Jesus oftentimes open us to seeing the enormous potential in our lives. Elijah's presence at the Transfiguration is filled with great symbolic meaning regarding the potential that lies within the followers of Jesus, especially after the resurrection. Luke finishes the story of Jesus and his disciples after the Transfiguration in chapters 10-24 through the framework of Elijah and his disciple Elisha. A key point in understanding how Luke writes his gospel from this perspective is the reference to the disciples straining to keep their eyes on Jesus as they fight off sleep. Please hear that part our gospel lesson in verses 31 & 32 again.

Moses and Elijah appeared in glory and were speaking of Jesus' departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw the glory of Jesus and the two men with him.

This passage anticipates the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now let's lay this passage beside the passage about the Elijah and Elisha when Elijah is about to depart this earth as recorded in II Kings 2:9-10.

When they had crossed the Jordan, Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you." And Elisha said, "I pray you, let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

And Elijah said, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if you do not see me, it shall not be so."

A few verses later we are told that Elisha sees Elijah depart to heaven in a whirlwind and he received the double portion of the great prophet's spirit.

Just like Elisha received a double portion of the spirit when he sees Elijah depart we read in Acts 1, which is written by Luke, that the disciples see Jesus depart by way of the Ascension and then they are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit ten days later on Pentecost Day. Luke is telling us that we realize our great potential in life as we keep our focus on the divine presence in our midst. As it happened for the twelve disciples at the Ascension and as it happened for Elisha when Elijah was swept into heaven it can happen for you and me.

Identity and Lifestyle Reveals Potential

It is interesting that points of loss and challenge lay the foundation for biblical characters to realize their own potential. Think about it. It is after Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers that he eventually becomes Pharaoh's right hand man. It is after Moses is exiled from his royal life in Egypt that he hears the call to be the liberator of his people. It is after Elisha loses Elijah that he finds the double portion of the spirit within. It is after John the Baptist is beheaded that the ministry of Jesus takes off.

It is after Jesus departs that the disciples are transformed into leaders that change the world. God works through us in all circumstances but the biblical text seems to suggest that God's presence is most accessible at times of loss and transition as we keep our eye of the divine presence as Elisha did and the disciples did at the Transfiguration.

Our identity and lifestyle as disciples of Jesus, the Transfigured One, enables us to live life to its full potential. Amen.

Let us now celebrate God's grace in our lives as we share in Holy Communion. Please open your hymnals to page 15 for the service of Holy Communion.