

SERMON, ST JOHNS

EPIPHANY VIII

In the most ancient Hawaiian voyaging traditions about the earliest settlers from Kahiki (Tahiti), Makaliʻi is said to be the ancestor of the makaʻāinana, the commoners, while Hawaiʻiloa was the ancestor of the aliʻi. Makaliʻi (which incidentally means the “Pleiades”), was Hawaiʻiloa’s navigator in bringing the first Polynesians to these islands. In Hawaiian legend, he achieved the status of a demi-god, whose home in the heavens was resorted to by seers who sent messengers up to him to seek knowledge of the future or to define events of the present. His wife, Malanaihuaheahea, who resided with him in a heavenly dwelling, is a celestial beauty who is described as follows: “Her skin was as red as fire, on coming out of the house, her beauty would overshadow the rays of the sun, so that darkness would cover the land, the red rain would be seen approaching; the fog also, and after these things, then the fine rain, then the red water would flow and the lightning play in the heavens. After this, her form would be seen coming along over the tips of the fingers of her servants, in all her beauty. The sun shone at her back and the rainbow was as though it were her footstool.”

Blinding light, dazzling white, vivid red and flashing rainbows, all characterized divinity in the stories of ancient Hawaiʻi and many other world religious traditions. In today’s magnificent account from Luke of our Lord’s Transfiguration on the Holy Mount Tabor, we have a similar vision of divine splendor: “the appearance of Jesus’ face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white”...Moses and Elijah talked with him, appearing “in glory.” Peter, James and John are weighed down with sleep, but were awakened by this vision of celestial magnificence. “A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!”

And the mountain, traditionally, understood as Mt Tabor in Galilee, a single peak that rises above the Vale of Jezreel, is another archetype of divine light in the great world religions. Moses, of course, whose face shone like the sun, received the Torah on Mt. Sinai, the Greek gods dwelled in light and glory on Mt Olympus, the Hopi Kachinas come into the human world from the San Francisco Peaks of Northern Arizona, and from Mt. Diablo in the SF Bay Area, Hummingbird, Turtle and Coyote created light, fire and human beings. Our own Haleakalā, the “House of the Sun,” is rich with meaning for Native Hawaiians. It is here that Māui captured the Sun and forced it to slow down so that Hina his mother could complete her daily tasks of kapa-making. To see the sun rise or set over Haleakalā is a magnificent experience, but simply to see the sun’s light rise as an arc to illumine Kahalawai, the West Maui Mountains, as I have the privilege of admiring every morning, instils the soul with profound awe and wonder.

So, what do we make of this strange Transfiguration event in the life of Jesus? What can be its meaning? Its significance lies in the fact that this demonstration of divine glory takes place in the midst of the ordinary round of ministry for Jesus. In the previous chapter, he teaches in parables, calms the storm, heals the Gerasene demoniac (a gentile), restores a girl to life and feeds the 5,000. Most importantly, however, he predicts his own death immediately prior to the Transfiguration: “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders,

chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise again.” Then, immediately after this mystical event on the mountain, he and the disciples “come down from the mountain,” and recommence the business of healing the boy with the demon. In many ways, those words “come down from the mountain,” are the punchline for this passage, and Luke intends to emphasize that it’s not all about the mystical experience itself, but about the ordinary round of life that is, perhaps, **inspired** by the vision of glory, but which is the bread and butter of human existence. Our lives are authentically lived, not in those extraordinary moments of vision, but in our everyday encounters with family, friends, neighbors and all the strangers we meet in our journey of life. The story is intended to convey the truth that the vision of God’s glory is, in fact, not just a mystical experience of self “enlightenment”, but a revelation that, as I’ve said before, “the true glory of God is humankind fully alive.” We need these glorious revelations of divine light and love, but they are meaningless within the Christian scheme of things unless we come down from the mountain and begin again our work of healing this broken world. The other critical portion of this passage is the curious conversation that Moses and Elijah have with Jesus in this midst of this glory. Moses, of course, represents the Torah of ancient Israel, and Elijah, the Prophets and together they represent the totality of Jewish religious tradition affirming the truth that Jesus is the fulfilment of all that has come before. The Eastern Orthodox tradition goes a step further to suggest that Elijah represents all the living, because he didn’t die a natural death, but was taken up in a whirlwind, while Moses represents the dead, because he did, indeed, die normally. So, the totality of humanity, the living and the dead, acknowledge the divinity of Jesus, as well as the Holy Trinity revealed here as the Father in the voice from heaven, the Son and the Holy Spirit symbolized by the enveloping cloud.

But note what Moses and Elijah discuss with Jesus: they speak “of his departure, which he is to accomplish at Jerusalem.” Unfortunately, the English translation obscures the original Greek of the passage, which actually reads, “His Exodus, which he is to accomplish at Jerusalem.” As we seen, immediately before this event, Jesus spoke of his death, and now his death is related to the great saving event of the Jewish people: the Passover and their Exodus from death to life through the waters of the Red Sea. The Transfiguration, then, cannot be understood except in the context of the Cross and here the dazzling light of Mount Tabor must be seen as the Glory of Perfect Love, for God is himself on the Cross demonstrating that he is eternally present in every Cross of our human existence.

And I preach to you this day when the Ukrainian people are on the Cross. The vicious invasion of Ukraine by Russia is a terrible reminder of the emptiness of any religion that glories in basking in the dazzling light of self-enlightenment, while ignoring the central work of Jesus: to come down from the mountain of Transfiguration to heal a broken world. And here is a profound and dreadful irony: the Orthodox faith of both the Russian and Ukrainian people celebrates Transfiguration as the revelation of both the Trinity and of the “uncreated” light of the heavenly realm. To them, this uncreated light is what dazzled God’s creation before Adam’s fall from grace and it is the same light that blazes for eternity in the presence of God for those who are risen with Christ. The light of Tabor is a glimpse of both the true nature of Christ as Perfect, self-giving Love and it stands for our own destiny to shine with him, for in the Orthodox tradition the goal of humanity is to become divine as Christ is divine. Last night I watched images of dazzling light over Kiev, but it was not the uncreated light of heaven, but humankind’s cruel creation: the light of exploding missiles in the dark Ukrainian night, the fires of hell. Not

the light of life, but the light of death. The light of Transfiguration, wherein the Cross is itself the glory, the Exodus through death to Life, must call us all to acts of self-reckoning, to rededicate our lives to healing, compassion and peace. And I pray that, particularly the Russian people, whose ancient faith is so deeply rooted in the uncreated Light of Tabor, the Light of self-giving Love, may, convicted by that faith, cease this terrible act of darkness.