

St. Andrew's Church - February 14, 2010
Sermon "Valentines Day" - The Rev. Douglas Kendall

God of ages,

may the words of my mouth,

and the thoughts and meditations of all of our hearts,

be acceptable to you, our God and our strength. AMEN.

I considered preaching on the origins of Valentine's day today,

Since it is rare that Valentine's day fall on a Sunday.

After a little research I changed my mind.

As part of the second Vatican council

St. Valentine was removed from the calendar of saints by the Roman Church,

though as we know still celebrated in many parts of the world.

Actually there were three St. Valentines listed,

And February 14th as the date for Valentines Day

dates back to the 4th century.

Tradition as it that Valentinus was a priest in Rome.

The Roman Emperor at the time, Claudius the second

Found that married men made poor soldiers

because they kept wanting to go home to their wives and families,

so the emperor banned marriage for all young men.

Valentinus thought this was wrong, so he secretly continued to perform marriages,

And when the emperor found out, he had Valentinus imprisoned.

Again legend has it that Valentius fell in love with his jailer's daughter,

And on the night before he was to be killed he sent her a love letter,

And signed it "Your Valentine" since that was his name.

On the next day, February 14th, he was put to death,

And became a martyr and forever the saint of love.

Unfortunately this beautiful story seems to have almost no basis in fact.

The was a Valentinus who was a priest in Rome in the second century,

And he was put to death on February 14th,

But that is where fact and fiction become a little muddy.

More than likely Valentines day came about

because there was a Roman Pagan fertility festival in the middle of February,

called Lupercalia.

It involved the sacrifice of a goat and a dog,

And all kinds of fertility rituals that I will not get into right now.

One thing that was included though was a lottery.

After the aforementioned fertility rituals

all of the young single women from the town would put their names in a big urn
and the single men would pick a name from the urn
and that would be his woman for the year.

In the fourth century the Pope realized that it would be impossible

to get rid of the mid February fertility festival altogether,
so he declared St. Valentines day on February 14th,
right in the middle of the month and in the middle of Lupercalia,
and re-branded the roman Pagan fertility festival as a Christian holiday.

So happy Valentines day, and if you want to know more about Lupercalia,

And you have a strong stomach,
Ask me about it during coffee hour.

All of that to say that I am not going to preach on Valentine's day,

But on Jesus transfiguration...
Which is also about love, but does not involve flowers, or chocolate,
Or the sacrifice of a goat and a dog.

Today's scripture reading is a challenging one for our 21st century minds,

As we see Jesus on a mountain top transformed into something other worldly,
And in the company of two people from the past who are long since dead.

At the heart of it, I believe today's passage asks us to what extent to we live in the past,

To what extent do we live in the future,
And to what extent are we able to live in the present.

On the top of the mountain,

as Jesus and Peter and James and John stood there,
the past, and the future collided with each other.

It is almost like a scene out of Star Trek or some other sci-fi show,

where the space time continuum folds in on itself.

A place in reality where time is no longer relevant,

or so it would appear at first glance anyway.

We are told that while the four of them,

Jesus and the three disciples, were on the mountain top,
"...Jesus was transfigured before them
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no one on earth could bleach them."

After this transformation or transfiguration of Jesus,

as the disciples were watching in disbelief,
"...there appeared to them Elijah with Moses,
who were talking with Jesus.

Somehow Peter and the other disciples recognized Moses and Elijah,
and they must have realized at that moment
that something out of the ordinary was happening.
The normal rules of time and space had been suspended for a moment.

Why Moses and Elijah though?
Why not have Isaiah and Adam appear,
or Esther and King David,
Or Abraham and Sarah?

Well, Moses was special,
because he was the embodiment of the law.
It was, after all, the Law of Moses.
It was Moses who had been given the tablets on Mount Sinai,
another mountain top experience by the way that looks a lot like this one.
An experience with clouds and God's voice,
and a transformation of the person and his robes.

So Moses was there out of the past to speak with Jesus,
because he represented the law,
God's gift to his chosen people.

And Elijah?
Elijah not only represents the collective wisdom of the prophets,
but it was believed that Elijah would return again when the Messiah arrived.
In the Old Testament tradition,
Elijah was taken up into heaven, rather than dying like most people.
Because of this unique end to his life,
it was believed that he would come again in the end times.

So at that moment on the mountaintop,
the collective wisdom of the prophets of God in Elijah,
and the great gift of the Law of Moses,
both appeared to Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth.

It was at that moment as well, that the disciples began to grasp in a new way,
that Jesus was going to be much more than just their teacher and guide,

a preacher and a healer.

It was at that moment that they began to grasp, even in a small way,
who this Jesus was, and who he would become.

It was at that moment that the disciples got a glimpse into what the future held
for their teacher and friend.

The collective wisdom of the past, embodied in Moses and Elijah,
and the vision of the future, embodied in the transformed Jesus,
converged at that moment on the mountain top.

It seemed to be a life changing moment for the disciples,
and they had no idea what to do with it.

Peter, always the man of action wanted to do something.

He didn't want this moment to just slip away,
so he blurted out..

"Rabbi, it is good for us to be here;

let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Jesus says nothing to the disciples,

Though somehow I can picture him giving them a look.

And I am sure that as soon as the words were off Peter's lips,

he realized that it was a comment that made no sense.

And yet it tells us something about Peter and the other disciples as well.

They did not want that mountain top experience to end.

They wanted to hold onto it, to make it more real, more permanent.

If they could build three little homes for the great figures before them,

then maybe they would stay,

and any time they wished to visit with Elijah or Moses,

they could simply walk up the mountain again and find them there.

Not only homes for Moses and Elijah though.

Peter wants to make three shelters, one for Jesus as well.

This shows us that the disciples were beginning to realize

that Jesus was on par with these great symbols from the past.

Whatever the reason, Peter realized that what was happening in front of their eyes,

was not permanent, and he wished to make it more real,

more physical more tangible.

Build three shelters for them - that would be real.

At that moment,

when Jesus did not respond to Peter's words, God did.

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Familiar phrase now isn't it.

We heard it before at Jesus baptism,

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And now at the moment when the disciples are seeing Jesus as who he will be,

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

And with those words from God, the mountaintop experience was over.

The past in the form of Moses and Elijah melted away with the dissipating cloud,

and the future in the form of the dazzling Jesus,

receded back into the future where it belonged,

and there were the three disciples standing on the top of a mountain,

with their teacher and friend Jesus.

Nothing tangible left from their experience.

Nothing they could point to and say,

"See, this is where it all happened."

No scorched earth, no residual cloud,

no three shelters standing as a monument to the moment,

just the memory of the event,

and the knowledge that Jesus was someone very special.

The past, in the form of Moses and Elijah was gone,

they couldn't hold onto it.

The future in the form of the changed Jesus was yet to be,

and all they had left was the present.

After an experience like that,

it would be difficult to go back to the everyday.

It would be difficult to go back to the usual teaching and healing.

They had seen the promises of the future and the wonders of the past.

They had heard the voice of God on the mountaintop,

how could they just go back to being everyday people?

And yet even before they had reached the bottom of the mountain,

they were confronted with reality.

From mountain top experience back to the usual everyday present life.

Nothing spectacular about this; just life.

But perhaps that is what this passage is about,

Perhaps that is what the present is all about.

The future holds our dreams and our visions.

and the future is filled with God's plans for us.

The past is an amazing gift to us.

filled with memories of what has happened,

filled with lessons we can learn,

and wisdom we can glean.

But we can neither hold onto the past, nor allow it to keep a hold on us.

And while we can and should make plans for the future,

and try to figure out what God wants us to do and be,

the future that is filled with God's plans and dreams is still the future.

Where we live is the present, and this is the only place that we can act,

The only place where we can do things.

Where we live is the often mundane everyday events of our lives.

But if you think about it,

these mundane events today are our dreams from yesterday,

and are the memories of tomorrow.

We are living our dreams and our history right now,

And all too often we rush through these moments,

Because we are so busy anticipating the future,

Or living in what we remember the past to have been.

We can't go back to the history that has passed,

but we can make history today.

We can't anticipate everything that the future will be,

but we can work today towards the dreams and the possibilities the future holds.

The disciples on the mountain top wanted to hold onto what they saw.

They wanted to build shelters to house the past in Moses and Elijah,

and to enclose the future in the transfigured Jesus.

That was not possible though.

The past has come and gone,

the future is yet,

and all we have is the present.

In the present we enjoy the beauty of God's creation

in something as simple as fresh new falling snow.

We marvel at our accomplishments as human beings,

And we mourn our shortcomings.

In the present we take time to rest and reflect on the lives we have,
and then it is time to move on.

In the present we care for others, and we allow others to care for us.

May God grant us the wisdom to learn from the past and then to let it go,
may his Son Jesus Christ give us a vision of the future that can be,
and may God's Holy Spirit fill each and every one of our everyday lives,
with precious moments that are the fulfillment of yesterdays dreams,
and worthy of being tomorrows memories.

In Jesus name we this, AMEN