

A Glimpse of Glory

sermon digest

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Luke 9: 28-36; 2 Peter 1:16-19

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On March 24, 1980, Archbishop of El Salvador Oscar Romero was shot down as he raised the chalice at the conclusion of the Eucharist in a small hospital chapel. A native of El Salvador, the Archbishop grew up in a country in which forty per cent of the land belonged to thirteen families and military violence had become the primary tool for controlling the Church and the people. Romero's appointment as Archbishop in 1977 had been something of a disappointment among liberal priests for fear that he would attempt to silence the controversial Liberation Theology movement, but Romero's open confrontation with the government war on the people clearly and quickly identified him with the poor and the oppressed. Although appointed with government approval, Romero became the establishment's worst nightmare.

On the day before his death, Romero's Lenten homily was on the Transfiguration of Christ, the Roman Catholic Lectionary text for Second Sunday of Lent. It was a favorite text that he preached both in Lent and at the Feast of the Transfiguration on August sixth. In the twelve year revolution, 75,000 lives had been claimed by violence in El Salvador. Romero reported that seventy-eight people had been murdered by the government in the previous week. Amnesty International had identified El Salvador as the worst nation in the world for human rights violations. He concluded his homily with an appeal to soldiers to stop killing their brothers and sisters and directly challenged the authority of the national security regime. In a recent article (*Theological Studies* March, 2011, pp 87-115) "Oscar Romero's Theology of Transfiguration," Margaret R. Pfeil noted that Romero preached his own death sentence in this Transfiguration homily: "Romero had spoken God's word to 'the gods of power and of money' in El Salvador, naming the idols that resisted the divine power manifested in the Transfiguration."

This is most unusual. Typically the interpretation of the Transfiguration found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke have not inspired a lot of controversy. If anything, the story appears as a mountaintop retreat from the world below where the road leads to Jerusalem and to the cross.

Following the famous confession of Peter "You are the Christ" at Caesarea Philippi and Jesus' announcement that his path leads to a cross, in Mark and Matthew Peter rebukes the idea of a suffering Christ; and Jesus declared, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." About a week later Jesus appointed Peter, John, and James as companions in a mountain retreat for prayer. There the three disciples witnessed a change in his appearance as Jesus prayed. His face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. He became the light of God. The word is *doxa* from which we get our Doxology. It is translated "glory" in the Hebrew *shekina*, a blinding light that surrounds the presence of God. The *shekina* glory shined from the face of Moses as he came down from Mount Sinai with the Law. Thus, Moses along with Elijah appeared with in glory with Jesus on the top of the mountain. The changed appearance, *metanoia*, was "transfiguration."

When Peter blundered with the suggestion of setting up three tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah on top of the mountain, a cloud moved in and "overshadowed" and "terrified" them. Like the Exodus, the cloud represented the mysterious presence of God. Like the baptism of Jesus, a voice affirmed the identity of Jesus the Son and commanded, "listen to him!"

Does the gospel of Christ avoid responsibility for this world? One has to ask, "where's the beef?" What is so revolutionary about this Gospel episode? In the biblical world where God is up and evil is down, mountaintops, the high places, were favorite locations for temples and cities. Moses receives the Law from Mount Sinai, and Jesus preaches his famous sermon on mount in Matthew as the second Moses bringing the rule of God to the people. In the final word from Christ in Matthew Jesus speaks again from a mountain, the Great Commission. For many interpreters, the biggest issue here is whether the Transfiguration is a misplaced resurrection appearance. The Gnostic writing discovered at Nag Hamaddi, *The Apocalypse of Peter*, places the event at the Ascension of Jesus. Furthermore the Gnostics created a firestorm of controversy over the claim that Jesus was never a real, flesh-and-blood, human person; he only "appeared" to be human. They liked the Transfiguration that put Jesus above it all in an ethereal cloud where he was untouchable and unreachable.

So here we are on Ascension Sunday, the final Sunday of Easter gazing with the disciples at the

ethereal, heavenly Christ, asking again what is this gospel about? I have been up and down that mountain with the disciples of old. "The Transfiguration" was believed to be Raphael's final painting. Jesus floats in the cloud with Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain as Peter, James, and John lie prostrate on the ground beneath the scene. In the foreground at the foot of the mountain, the other disciples struggle with their failure to heal the epileptic child and point to the heavenly Christ. Raphael took the geography of the Transfiguration as a metaphor for the bipolar Christian faith that has been the key interpretation for preachers for centuries.

I have been there and done that. I have asked the congregation, "shall we build our tabernacles on the top of the mountain away from the dirty business of sickness and death that plagues the world at the foot of the mountain?" And, it has always seemed correct to say that we need both *worship* and *service*; we need to escape to the mountaintop to prepare ourselves for the problems in the valley; disciples must be ready to go up the mountain with Jesus and to go down with him to face the struggle in the world below. In Mark, Jesus seems to join the trek up and down the mountain by telling the disciples that this kind of problem can only be healed through prayer.

Not once when I have milked the metaphor has the congregation taken up a revolutionary cause or decided to march off to a radical new way of life. It all seems so benign, so introspective. Let's all get together to pray that God will lift some poor child out of his pain. What's so radical about that? All of the burden of action rests on the divine shoulders. We are poor helpless disciples. No one should expect us to heal all of the world's ills or even to get involved in the world's problems. It was probably a poor interpretation of Calvin, but nevertheless it became identical with Calvinism. When the nineteenth century English Baptist cobbler William Carey preached a sermon calling for the church to send missionaries to the "heathen," one of the elders declared that when God decided to save the heathen, he would do it without your help or mine. The motto of the church became, "Let God do it," while Carey went to India and became the father of the modern missionary movement.

So the question comes back to Oscar Romero: what does the church have to do with the revolution burning in El Salvador? Shall we pray for God to stop the killing? Shall we fold our hands in pious sympathy with the pathetically rich landholders and a government committed to status quo? After all, the priesthood is a spiritual work. The question has been raging for centuries. Does God really care about the physical needs of people? Walter Rauschenbush preached that the real gospel is a social gospel that addresses the whole person from the center of the soul to the sole of the foot.

The path of the transfiguration leads to the cross and the resurrection. In context with the word of the cross, the Transfiguration comes down to marching orders. Jesus has already declared that his path leads to a cross and that disciples must follow. The command on the mountain is clear: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" The destiny of the Christ went beyond the healing of the child at the foot of the mountain. This is where the Gospels turn toward the cross and the resurrection.

Pfeil notes the interpretation in the Transfiguration theology of Romero. The suffering of the cross in behalf of God's children leads ultimately to our victory with Christ in the resurrection. The Church is the Body of Christ on earth bound to continue the work of ministry which was begun by our Lord. Finally, the work of the gospel is *metanoia*, transfiguration. We are called to bring radical change in the world. Although this meant a "revolution" to Romero, following Christ could never justify violence against God's children. The most violent act of Romero in El Salvador was confronting power with truth and taking the violence of his acts upon himself so that others might live. The way of the cross, the way of Christ, was then and is now a



pathway to suffering *with* and suffering *for* the people at the bottom of the pile.

Is the Transfiguration a call to revolution? Probably none of the Gospel writers would have recognized the meaning of the Transfiguration in the theology of Romero, but that does not rule out the truth of his preaching. A mystery of biblical interpretation is the way that current circumstances and events seem to connect themselves to otherwise irrelevant passages of scripture. Romero found a call to Christian revolution in El Salvador that folks in Tennessee might never see. Like with the abandonment of slavery, the embrace of Gentiles as children of God, the move to monogamous marriage, and the equality of women, biblical social practices are often confronted and changed by revelation in current events.

More than two years before Oscar Romero became Archbishop of El Salvador, Union Theological Seminary professor Paul Lehmann wrote *The Transfiguration of Politics* to address the raging revolution of his age. We have no evidence that Romero ever read or even knew of Lehmann's book, but somehow these two men from very different parts of the world and extremely different Christian Communion reached the same conclusion about the Transfiguration of Jesus. They saw a call to transformation of the world of people and human need in the radical change that took place in Jesus on the mountain. They both saw beyond the "gentle Jesus meek and mild" of sidelines Christianity. They saw in the Transfiguration anything but an escape from the struggling people at the foot of the mountain of prayer. The Transfiguration calls for change in you and in me so that through our commitment to the cross, God will change the world.