

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-ninth Verse of the thirty-fourth Chapter of the Second Book of Moses, Called Exodus.ⁱⁱ

“And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses’ hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him. And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him: and Moses talked with them. And afterward all the children of Israel came nigh: and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him in mount Sinai. And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But when Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out. And he came out, and spake unto the children of Israel that which he was commanded. And the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone: and Moses put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. And there appeared unto them Elias with Moses: and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid. And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And suddenly, when they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves. And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that

they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean. And they asked him, saying, Why say the scribes that Elias must first come? And he answered and told them, Elias verily cometh first, and restoreth all things; and how it is written of the Son of man, that he must suffer many things, and be set at nought. But I say unto you, That Elias is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, as it is written of him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “When Moses came down from Mount Sinai ... Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. And when Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Although the Isaelites had never before encountered it, what they recognized shining forth from Moses’ face, after he had been in God’s presence on the mountain, was “the glory of the Lord”, the *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**], the blinding light that in Scripture is the unique sign of the presence of God.

As we learn from today’s Second Lesson, this *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**] was also the blazing light that transfigured Jesus – that changed Jesus’ fundamental appearance -- in the presence of Saints Peter, James, and John.^v And as we learn from the Book of Acts of the Apostles, this was the burst of light that blinded Saul of Tarsus when the risen Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus.^{vi}

Notice that in all these cases, the Hebrews meeting Moses as he descended the mountain, the three Apostles seeing Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah, Saul hearing Jesus speak to him on the road, in all these cases, knowledgeable Jews who perceived this particular light immediately knew it for what it was. Further, as soon as they recognized it, they feared the presence of God which it signified.

It is an awe-filled thing to be in the presence of God for those who come into His presence unworthily quite literally risk their lives by doing so.

Good Jewish men that they were, Peter, James, and John could not possibly mistake this *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**]. They knew it for what it was and for what it signified: it was the evidence, in clear Old Testament terms – and the Old Testament was the only Bible they then knew – it was the incontrovertible evidence that the man they knew as Jesus was, at an absolute minimum, one who met with God and spoke to God in God’s own Presence.

That far, it might have been possible for these three Apostles to have descended from that mountain without realizing that their master, who is Our Lord, is truly divine. Had His transformation by the *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**] been the only prophetic element there, they could still, perhaps, have made the mistake of thinking He was only human, although obviously a very important human, one greatly loved by God.

This intense light, light so strong a person could not comfortably gaze on it with unprotected eyes in the same way one cannot look into the Sun without damaging one’s sight, that light recalls directly a prophecy of the prophet Malachi, regarding the coming of the Messiah:

“For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings.”^{vii} So the light like the Sun’s that Peter, James, and John saw was the sign of the “sun of righteousness” whom Malachi foretold.

But the intense, transformative light, important as it was, was not the only feature of that incident. There was more. The three Apostles observed their master walking about in that divine blaze of light in the company of two other men and they were able to recognize those men as Elijah and Moses.

To the Jews, Elijah and Moses had particular importance, importance that raised them up above even the other Old Testament prophets. Moses was the one to whom God had spoken on Mount Sinai, the divinely-chosen leader of their redemption out of Egypt, the founder of their nation. For him to appear with Jesus was a sign that just as the coming of Moses had begun the foundation of the

Hebrew people to be the instrument of God's plan for mankind, so the coming of Christ was the fulfillment of that plan.

Elijah was the most powerful of the prophets; where others could only call down maledictions upon erring kings, Elijah could make the evil Ahab quail, his prayers could bring three and a half years of drought to afflict the kingdom until the people repented of their sinful following of their sovereign's pagan ways, and then, when his point was made, his prayers could bring the rains to end that drought.^{viii}

Presaging Our Lord's miracles in the New Testament, Elijah miraculously increased the flour and oil of the widow of Zarephath^{ix} [**ZARE-ee-fath**] and, again presaging Our Lord's raising of Lazarus, Elijah restored that woman's dead son to life.^x Finally, Elijah, like Our Lord, did not die and thereafter rest in a grave in the earth but, instead, was caught up alive into heaven.^{xi}

Thus, where Elijah was so clearly a *type* or scriptural precursor of Our Lord's, it should occasion no surprise to learn that the Old Testament Jews developed a strong tradition that Elijah would return to accompany the coming of the Messiah and that Elijah's reappearance would therefore be one of the messianic signs. So the prophet Malachi continued, in the passage we previously quoted:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse.”^{xii}

Conclusion:

Therefore, when Peter, James, and John saw all of those signs and symbols together on the mount of the Transfiguration – the *Shekinah* [**SHEH-khine-eh**] glory of God, so powerful that it transformed Jesus' body, the figure of Moses, the founder of the covenant people and their representative and designated negotiator of that covenant with God, and Elijah, whose appearance was foretold to signal the coming of the Messiah – they knew beyond doubt that their human master, the journeyman craftsman from the little village of Nazareth, was the Anointed One, the *Meshiach* [**MEH-shy-ach**] for whom the Israelites longed.

Good Jews that they were, no sooner did they realize that they had been in the presence of God than they were struck with fear. We, like they, have been given the immeasurable gift of coming into the presence of God, which we do each time

we celebrate the Eucharist. But do we approach that awe-filled presence with the same realization and respect as did they?

If we truly think what we are about when we presume not only to come into the presence of God but actually to take Him into our very bodies, we may do so less blithely, less as a matter of accustomed routine, and with a greater sense of the unbelievable miracle in which we are permitted to take part.

When we approach the altar, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, are we as aware of what we are about as was Peter, who when he realized he was confronted by the very presence of God “did not know what to say, for they were exceeding afraid”?^{xiii}

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Exodus 34: 29- (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Mark 9: 2-13 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Exodus 34: 29-30 (RSV).*

^v *St. Matthew 17: 1-6; St. Mark 9: 2-8; St. Luke 9: 28-35; II Peter 1: 16-18.*

^{vi} *Acts 9: 3 & 8.*

^{vii} *Malachi 4: 1-2a (RSV).*

^{viii} *I Kings 18: 41-45; James 5: 17-18.*

^{ix} *I Kings 17: 14-16.*

^x *I Kings 17: 17-24.*

^{xi} *II Kings 2:11.*

^{xii} *Malachi 4: 5-6 (RSV).*

^{xiii} *St. Mark 9: 5-6 (RSV).*

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