



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Last Sunday in Epiphany (C)

#### Radical Amazement!

[RCL] Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

*“About eight days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.”* “These sayings” included telling them that in Jerusalem he would be rejected, he would die, and after three days be raised from the dead; that to be a disciple of his one needs to pick up one’s cross daily; that it is necessary to lose one’s life to save it. Knowing that is what had been said makes it readily apparent why he goes up on the mountain to pray.

The three sleepy disciples look on as Jesus’ appearance becomes dazzlingly bright, reminiscent of those times Moses would ascend Mount Sinai to meet with God face-to-face. On the way down, the people could not look at Moses, so dazzlingly bright was his face (Exodus 34:29-35). The dazzling Moses appears with Elijah, he of the blazing chariot, to pay Jesus a visit to discuss his “departure.”

Departure in Greek is *exodos*. They were talking about his exodus which would occur in Jerusalem. This is why we call Christ’s sacrifice “our Passover.” His death will be an exodus; his resurrection is another exodus. Think of Moses and Elijah as paying a pastoral visit to assure Jesus that they have been before where he is now, and that sure enough, just as it had been in the wilderness, as it was when fleeing Ahab and Jezebel, as it has been throughout the history of our people, God always provides a way out, an escape route, a way out of bondage, a way out of the hard times, a way beyond and passing over death to a life lived with God all the time. Eternal life with God. We call it Resurrection Life.

Peter does not miss the importance of the occasion and suggests building three booths: shelters resembling the temporary dwellings patterned after ones in the book of Exodus, dwelling in which the people lived during their wilderness sojourn. Shelters able to be picked-up and moved down the road. The kind of shelter in which all of Israel is commanded to live one week each year during the Festival of Succoth, the Feast of Tabernacles, which, we hear in the gospels, Jesus and his disciples faithfully observed each year.

Succoth celebrates the reality that, in the wilderness, God provides, and that we must trust this and be grateful. To this day, the Jewish people build a Succoth booth for an eight-day remembrance once a year. It must be built so that one can see the stars through the roof, and rain must be able to get in. During this

eight-day celebration, one gathers together what are called the Four Species: branches of citron, willow, myrtle and palm.

Palms, like those we will gather from last year's Palm Sunday, which will be burned for ashes to be used on Ash Wednesday later this week. The willow and myrtle are bound to the Palm, making what is called a *lulav*. With the citron in one hand, the *lulav* in the other, they are waved in all four directions, north, south, east, and west, then upwards and downwards to indicate that God is everywhere! Indeed, the voice heard at Jesus's baptism returns: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" As God's presence is heard, Moses and Elijah depart.

The Eighth Day of the Succoth festival is known as Shemini Atzeret, the "day of holding back," to stop or wait. It is the day the weekly Torah readings are completed and the scroll is turned back to the beginning – "In the beginning." The significance of Atzeret, or holding back, is quite interesting. The sages say that this parable is the basis of Shemini Atzeret: God is like a king who invites all his children to a feast to last for just so many days; when the time has come for them to depart, he says to them: "My children, I have a request to make of you. Stay yet another day; your departure is difficult for me." Which brings us back to that which Jesus, Moses, and Elijah were talking about: his departure, his exodus.

It tends to be overlooked that they likely spent the night on the mountain, for they do not come down until the next day. And curiously, no version of this story says Peter *did not* build the booths. So, we might ask, what did they do all night? Celebrate the Day of Holding Back with Jesus and God? Or did Peter, James, and John obey the voice from the cloud, and listen to Jesus all night long? Meanwhile, God knows that his son is going to Jerusalem, and wants to hold him back for one more night, as if to say, "Your departure is difficult for me."

Jesus's exodus did not end on Good Friday, any more than the great escape from Egypt was not the end of that first Exodus. For Exodus is always a beginning, just as the eight days of Succoth begin a new year of reading God's Word. Just as waving the Palms north, south, east, and west reminds us that wherever we are, God is with us; that our God is the one God who always wants just one more night with us. And another. Until eventually, we all come down off the mountain, end the exuberant celebrations, and get back to the work God calls us to do – to heal a broken world, a practice sometimes called *tikkun olam*.

Whatever might be said about Jesus of Nazareth, his life demonstrates how to live a life of *tikkun olam*: how to repair a broken world. We sense his impatience the next morning when his disciples fail to cast out a spirit convulsing a young man. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" he blurts out. Then he patiently takes care of the young man, and we are told, "All were amazed at the greatness of God!"

Amazement! Radical Amazement! Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to say that such amazement is the proper response to our experiences of the divine, and that living in radical amazement brings us into the

space in which “great things happen to the soul.”<sup>1</sup> Such experiences of the divine, as the disciples experienced that night on the mountain, begins by leaving the endless stream of chaotic events that distract us day and night, and withdraw from it all as Jesus does to pray.

In such moments of prayer, perhaps we will be re-energized to open our eyes and see the work of God’s hand all about us. Perhaps if we spend one more day with the God who does not want us to leave, we too will be amazed at the greatness of God. We may find our exodus out of chaos leads us to a new beginning in a world of resurrection, celebration, and radical amazement as those three disciples experienced on a mountaintop with Jesus, one night long ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955) p.117.

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