

The Last Sunday of Epiphany

Matthew 17:1-9

23 February 2020

Christ Church

About six or so years ago, David, I, Barbara McCue and Erin Donangelo led a youth pilgrimage to England. The pilgrimage included visits to Canterbury, Salisbury, Coventry, St. Paul's, and Westminster Cathedrals, as well as the parish of St. Martin in the Fields. As you might imagine, this was as much a history course on the English Church as an actual spiritual pilgrimage. By the time our days drew to a close, the youth and their leaders were fatigued, making spiritual reflection somewhat of an afterthought.

Each of these buildings was magnificent. It was mind boggling to consider that towering structures, with intricate ornamentation and architecture could be built by ordinary people and, without the assistance of our current day construction technology. The narrow, pointed, Gothic Structures reached into the sky – humanity's attempt to reach God perhaps, to mark the spot of a miracle, to set apart space for worship and devotion to the Divine.

If we reach back to the stories In Genesis, we can see that this has been a human response very early in our history. After Jacob has a vision of the ladder with angels ascending and descending, and an encounter with the Divine, he marks the place with a rock which he anoints. He wants this spot remembered – to honor God – to validate his experience.

The Celts, particularly the Scots, built towers of rocks called cairns along pathways. Their purpose was to mark a scared place or offer spiritual guidance, safety, and hope for travelers along the path. Cairns have made a comeback. You can see them along hiking trails. There are even a few in the yard of a house on Holcomb Bridge as you

drive toward the Railroad Track. As I walk past a cairn, my mind is drawn toward an awareness of the Divine – the little tower of rocks a visual reminder.

On April 15 of this past year, the world watched as Notre Dame Cathedral was ablaze. The News Feed on Face Book was flooded with pictures and laments. It was, especially for my artist and religious friends, a kind of funeral, as though the death of a very old friend.

Notre Dame was begun in 1163 and completed in 1220. It endured desecration during the French Revolution and subsequent restoration in the early 1800s. The fire on April 15 consumed the lead and oak roof, a large portion of the ribbed vaulted ceiling, some of the stained glass (but not the famous rose window) and the 750-ton spire.

President Macron sent out an all call to artists and architects to participate in its restoration. His desire was to make it a positive energy building, but the Senate voted this down. Since then Macron has set a five-year goal to restore it in time for the 2024 Olympics. But there are issues. Construction Workers and students at a nearby school have experienced lead poisoning from the burnt pieces of the roof.

Human beings go to a lot of trouble to express their devotion to God, or, if not that, an innate desire to create – not that the two are mutually exclusive. Others might argue that the act of creating is a participation in God. And still others would say, “Save the money and use it to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor.” (This was my reaction after seeing the jewels in the Papal Treasury)

So, is it Peter’s desire to create that compels him to build three tents in today’s Gospel? Is it that he wants to memorialize this moment in time when he and his friends, James and John, witness something other worldly?

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is the segue between two seasons: Epiphany, when the Divine nature of God as light is fully revealed in Jesus' baptism and this moment on the mountain; and then Lent, when the suffering of Jesus becomes our focal point.

It is important to remember that the Gospel writers crafted each of their accounts for a particular audience. Matthew's Gospel presents the story of Jesus to a predominantly Jewish community so that they might come to see Jesus' true nature. The Transfiguration shows that Jesus ranks right up there with Moses and Elijah, perhaps representations of the Law and the Prophets. Eugene Boring who wrote a definitive commentary on Matthew's Gospel, points out that Moses, Elijah and Jesus share something in common. All three are rejected initially but then later vindicated by God. They are miracle workers, upholders of the Law, and transcendent in that they are taken up into Heaven.

The Transfiguration is that teachable moment when Peter, James, and John see Jesus for who he really is. Peter wants to memorialize the moment. He wants to build something. He gets excited – nothing like a good building project to channel one's energy.

But then, the Gospel brings us to a strange ending. They start back down the mountain with Jesus as he is telling them not to say a word about this to anyone.

In other words, they don't get to build a monument and live in the rarified air of a mountain top. They come down the mountain to the "real world" that is awaiting them – a world filled with tension – a world where the divide between rich and poor, righteous and unrighteousness, the powerful and the weak is very great. Jesus leads his disciples to the place where the work of love is most needed. Jesus doesn't allow a building as a memorial to himself. No, His memorial is the cross, because the cross is the intersection of God's real and active love.

Jesus leads Peter, James, and John to this, and He continues to lead his disciples, you and me, to those places in need of real and abiding love. Yesterday, Christ Church hosted the Motel2Home program here in our parish hall. Motel2Home, an initiative of St. Vincent de Paul, Ga. United Way, the Gwinnett Housing Corporation, Live Norcross, and UNITE, a collaboration of Churches and civic organizations, seeks to assist families to move from homelessness to stability.

Christ Church is not a grand building. There are no flying buttresses here, nor rose windows. But, in our humble parish hall, many in great need of love and support, gathered in hope to learn about employment and transportation and all the things that are required to maintain a dwelling.

Christ Church provided space, babysitting, and casseroles; North End Collective Church provided breakfast; Generations Church provided lunch. Many others wrote letters of encouragement, prayers, gift cards. These are the monuments of the Gospel. Not buildings, but people helping people, families experiencing the love of God – not a grand tour, but the boots on the ground work of love.

Jesus leads his friends down the mountain. Shall we also follow?