

“The One is Shining Forth”
February 14, 2021
Transfiguration Sunday

Psalm 50
Mark 9: 2-9
Rev. Anne Schlesinger

Today is the last of a series that has focussed on the Psalms, and I will return to that theme in a moment, but I cannot altogether skip the transfiguration story. As many of you know, the story of Jesus’ transfiguration is read every year on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, which is the Sunday immediately preceding Ash Wednesday and the season of Lent. The first Sunday of Epiphany tells the story of Jesus baptized by John when heaven split open, the Spirit of God like a dove came down, and God’s voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus as God’s beloved son. Today’s story repeats the last part of that; God’s voice from the cloud told Jesus’ disciples to listen to him. This story appears in all three synoptic Gospels, is alluded to in the fourth Gospel, and appears yet again in the Epistle Second Peter. It is an important story that bears repeating. God’s kingdom is indeed close at hand when God’s will is realized and righteousness finally and fully established.

Righteousness is the subject of Psalm 50. God appears like the sun, shining brightly behind a devouring fire. The lectionary includes only the first six verses, which confirms what Walter Brueggemann said about the church often skipping over parts of Psalms that speak to protest and estrangement in wishful optimism. The first six verses of Psalm 50 are a theophany. Yahweh appears in the Temple to preside at court, accusing humanity of disobedience and breaking covenant. The remaining verses are Yahweh’s call to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving rather than burnt offerings. Some scholars suggest the Psalm was originally used as part of a covenant renewal service. They point to the eternal predicament of humanity—that is, sin. The *New Interpreter’s Bible* says it well. “Israel’s story is indeed a long list of mistakes... David’s story and the history of the subsequent monarchy are indeed very embarrassing. So is the Psalmist’s story... So is the behavior of the disciples... So is the situation of the Christian church, revealed in the letters of Paul... So is the history of the Christian church throughout the centuries. So are the denominational and congregational lives of the contemporary church. So are the details of our life stories, if we are honest enough to admit it.”¹ We all fall short. There is no denying it. The trouble in humanity’s relationship with God is in our perennial violation of the covenant. That’s the bad news. We need be under no illusion that we are like God, and that is the good news. The very next Psalm is a mirror image of this Psalm. They clearly belong together. Psalm 50 is about the nature of humanity, and how we all always falls short. Psalm 51 is about the nature of God, and God’s steadfast, unflinching love. Walter Brueggemann wrote, “Those who violate the covenant cannot count on the guarantees of the covenant Lord. They choose for themselves disorder, and they get what they choose. Where the holiness of God is trivialized, human life will be cheapened. Where human life is cheapened, the saving power of the Holy God will not be known... The last verse assures Israel that there is an alternative to this abandonment. There is a right sacrifice. It is thanksgiving, acknowledgement that God transforms life. Those who love their life out of such a posture are those who go ‘in

¹ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. “Psalm 51 Reflections.” *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IV.* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 888.

the way,' the the way of obedience, trust and proper acknowledgement. These, God saves. But saving can only be given to those who let God be God."² In both the Psalm and the story of the Transfiguration, we are encouraged to see how mighty and awesome our God is. God is in the fiery tempest and God is the one transfiguring before the disciples' eyes. As one commentator put it, "A big deal! A big God!"³ Like those three disciples on the mountaintop, we all should stand terrified in God's presence. To live into God's kingdom, we must honor God, honor righteousness, and defeat evil and corruption. Let's hear once again the verses at the end of the Psalm.

"You sit and speak against your sisters and brothers,
and you slander your own siblings.

I didn't say a word while you did those things—
you thought I was just like you."

We thought God is just like us? We thought God is a friend with whom we can cozy up? No wonder God was angry. But thankfully, where God is, so are both judgement *and* mercy.

God continues:

"But now I rebuke you and accuse you to your face.

So consider this, you who forget me—

or I'll tear you to pieces with no hope of rescue!

Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice

honor me and prepare my road.

To these I will reveal my salvation."

There is our call. Let us bring thanksgiving as our sacrifice, even amid a pandemic. Let us always and in everything give our thanks to God.

Amen.

² Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984) p. 91.

³ Fred Gaiser. "A Commentary on Psalm 50: 1-6." Source: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/transfiguration-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-psalm-501-6-3>