

Luke 9:28-36
February 27, 2022

Houses

One of the common features among human beings, across cultures and over time, is that they want to build some kind of structures; to live in, for shelter, to meet for various activities. They build buildings. When people come upon a place they think they want to stay for awhile, or at least come back often, or where they have a wondrous experience, they build a building.

Sometimes in strange places. In World War 2, the worst defeat suffered by American troops in the European theater actually took place Tunisia in North Africa at a place called the Kasserine Pass, up in the mountains. After the battle, the general in charge, was removed, given an ironic promotion and sent stateside where he spent the war in a training command.

One of his failures was that, about seventy miles behind the front, he had ordered a unit of engineers to carve out an underground bunker, fully equipped with electricity and water and living space. He was spending human and material resources building a house in a place, where if things went well, he wasn't going to stay.

We come to the last Sunday of Epiphany, before Lent begins on Wednesday. In the tradition of the Christian calendar year, the event that is observed and celebrated on this Sunday is the Transfiguration, when

Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on the mountain where he was changed before them.

Dressed in dazzling white like lightning they saw him having an apparently casual conversation, no substance is given, with Moses and Elijah . . . the lawgiver and the prophet. And there is the blinding light with the voice of God telling them, "this is my Son, whom I love, listen to him."

The event itself comes at the center of the earthly career of Jesus, immediately on the heels of the feeding of the multitude miracle and Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah. There is a turning point here, as the ministry of Jesus changes into the descent towards Jerusalem and the Passion.

It is not surprising that there is a conversation about the identity of Jesus and the meaning of it all. In the first of the Lenten study Sundays, we will take a look at that dialogue. For Peter, James, and John, this experience of the transfigured Christ, was a part of that conversation.

Interestingly, they wanted to build three houses, one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Given the human proclivity for building buildings, especially on places where they have wondrous experiences, their suggestion is also not surprising.

They were not allowed to build. As a matter of fact, what is more surprising is that their suggestion was ignored. The text in Luke says that they did not know

what they were saying. Then the voice came from the cloud, and they found Jesus alone. For the time being, they kept silent, without being instructed to do so like in Matthew and Mark's version of the story.

In addition to the question about the meaning of the human desire to build things, there is also another question: what does it mean that they were not allowed to build, that they were not even acknowledged?

We can start by saying that there is no need to build anything in a place, like the general, one is not going to stay. Furthermore, the spiritual life is a journey. It does not let us put down roots before the destination has been reached. We must confess that in the material sense, buildings are a necessary part of life. We can not live without them. We build them, and once we do, we stay in them, at least for awhile. Some of them carry a significance in our lives.

There is a conversation in the Old Testament between the priestly idea of a tent representing God's presence that moves wherever the people go, and the kingly notion of the temple in Jerusalem that becomes God's permanent dwelling. Part of the crisis of the bible involves the loss of that temple. What does one do then?

One of the features of modern life, according to some of the experts, is a loss of significance of the spiritual realm, or concern about the next life. Industrialized people, in the main, are pragmatic, occupied with

projects and solving problems in this life. It isn't so much that they don't believe in God or in heaven, as it is they are just not concerned about it. Thus the decline in church attendance. Even we are affected by this trend.

In the short run, we are given these physical places; cities, churches, houses, schools, they are a part of our earthly home. It is not wrong that we build them and come to cherish them.

If the point Jesus is making is that life is essentially spiritual, and we are all on a journey to heaven, then the faithful are called to be on the move, ever learning, ever growing, ever changing, meant to grow in grace and faith; to become . . . better.

The relationships we know are also a part of our earthly experience; family, friendships, the ones associated with our vocations, they are a part of our homes too. It might be suggested that the relationships of life go further in the direction of showing us the spiritual side of things and shaping our character than the buildings do. We ourselves, our lives, the community life we share, are the real temple.

For the time being we are caught between the two realms. The Transfiguration is a glimpse of the destination. It changes us so that we might be set free to live in the present house, without being bound by it, as we await the New Creation.