

Exodus 34:29-35 • Psalm 99 • II Corinthians 3:12-4:2 • St. Luke 9:28-36 • Epiphany Last • February 14, 2010 • St. Thomas Church, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once upon a time there was a man named Anskar. The time was actually the 9th century; Anskar is not a fiction. He was born in France in 801. In a time when education could not be assumed, he was fortunate enough to live in a town with a well-established monastery school. He attended the school, later professed as a monk at the monastery and was eventually placed in charge of the school.

Anskar's early days coincided with the last days of Charlemagne, who was trying to conquer the world for Christianity. Charlemagne had come to Denmark and Sweden, killing anyone who refused to be baptized and killing even Christians who did things like eating meat during Lent. By the time Anskar was an adult, by and large Christianity in Denmark and Sweden was nominal at best, most people who called themselves Christian did so to have saved their lives.

When the King of Denmark made a trip to visit the Emperor Louis in France, it was suggested to him that he take a monk back to Denmark with him as a companion and teacher. The Emperor asked Anskar if he would go and he was entirely willing. He was, as my grandmother would say, a good soldier. His friends and fellow monks tried to dissuade him because the North was indeed a very dangerous part of the world, but he accompanied the King.

After two years, there were no visible results of Anskar's missionary work, except that he had set up a boy's school. After a few more years, he moved on to Sweden to

bring the message of Christianity there as well. For the rest of his life, he moved back and forth between Denmark and Sweden as rulers and warring tribes allowed. He died in 865, having served in Sweden & Denmark for 33 years and, really, at the end of his life there were still no visible results of his labors. He had faced hardships and dangers his whole life and he had laid the foundation for Christianity to grow and spread throughout Scandinavia in the years to come.

Bishop John Wordsworth wrote of him, "There can be no question of Anskar's saintliness, according to the standard of any age of Christendom. His missionary zeal and courage, his uncomplaining patience, his generosity, his austere self-discipline and his diligence in the work of his calling were all striking features of his character." [*The National Church of Sweden* by John Wordsworth, p. 65 f.] Anskar is remembered not for the outcome of his personal labor, but because of his inspiring example to those who were moved to follow in his steps.

I've told Anskar's story today, a story of a life of daily faithfulness, as a contrast to the stories told in our Old Testament and Gospels lessons—stories about truly “mountain-top experiences”—rare and extraordinary. Both scripture stories highlight the awesome nature of an encounter with God's glory. Trying to relate to the Exodus story, I thought about how we don't generally look directly at the brightness of the sun, neither do we look directly at the sun reflected on a pool of water or a patch of snow. When Moses came into contact with God's presence, he did so with such fullness of energy and being that his body reflected what had shone upon him. He was so astoundingly different

in appearance that people were afraid. He had to reassure them before they would draw near and he put a veil over his face to remove from daily life the distraction of his unique relationship with God.

The Transfiguration story has many connections to the Exodus story. It was such an important event in the life of Jesus that all the Gospel writers tell about it. Luke's telling is different from the others in a couple of important ways. First, he doesn't use the word "transfigure." Luke tells the story from the experience of the disciples. They encountered Jesus their friend in a way that they could not have imagined. They couldn't have known what was happening within Jesus; they saw his appearance and it was unlike anything they had seen before—"other" is what the Greek says.

Second, Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us what Jesus, Moses and Elijah were talking about together. By naming Jesus' upcoming "departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem," Luke provides a concrete context for this unusual experience, putting it firmly in sober perspective. The conversational moment was not a pre-arranged tableau, only for the benefit of the on-lookers, but was a strengthening experience for Jesus' journey as well. The path ahead would not be easy, to say the least, and Jesus needed to encounter God's affirming love and strengthening glory.

Peter was so sure that he understood everything that he wanted to commemorate the moment. Like taking a picture, such a commemoration would in fact have been a way to distance everyone from the experience. The moment could be frozen in time, limited in effect, a static shell of what it was really about. The change in Jesus that the disciples had

seen was not something to be commemorated externally, but cultivated internally, in silence.

We still do sometimes experience big and powerful events in our lives. There is some momentous occasion and then back to ordinary life. The Transfiguration story is a reminder, especially of the big events in our lives that are moments we name as sacramental. When we walk away, all is as it was, yet all has changed. And what has changed is within—our faith is strengthened; our hope is on the fullness of glory yet to be; and our love is for those who are also heirs of God’s kingdom. This vision, full of faith, hope and love, has the power to change all else. Living with and reflecting upon an encounter with God’s glory allows us to be transformed from within.

This is Paul’s point in his attempt to explain the Holy Spirit to the Corinthian Christians. The excerpt from II Corinthians that was our Epistle lesson this morning reads like a commentary on the Exodus and Luke passages. He says that “all of us... seeing the glory of the Lord ...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” The glory doesn’t depend on us, but on God. Where do we find this glory? It’s all around us—in creation, in one another, and especially in those moments that we call sacraments.

When we receive the bread and wine, for example, it is more than the kind of commemoration that Peter had in mind. It is an encounter with a greater reality. It is the door to a change in everything. Transfiguration is larger than one moment, but has the power to change all the rest.

Paul helps us understand that we do not have to have a mountain-top experience in order to encounter God. We can grow into the image of God from one degree of glory to another—one decision at a time, one Eucharist at a time, one day at a time—because of the Holy Spirit within us.

This is the example of Anskar, whose life was probably pretty close to the pattern that our lives are called to be: faithful in the daily; faithful in the small things. Celtic Christianity probably comes closest to a unified pattern of intentional relationship with God for daily transformation. It is attention to the daily that moves us out from this place of encounter with God, so that on-going, what appears to be “back to normal” will be more. I close with an ancient Celtic prayer to guide us from the mountain-top of the Transfiguration toward the daily walk of Lent:

God to enfold me.
God to surround me.
God in my speaking.
God in my thinking.
God in my sleeping.
God in my waking.
God in my watching.
God in my hoping.
God in my life.
God on my lips.
God in my soul.
God in my heart.

May it be so. Amen.