

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church, Pinole, CA

The Last Sunday after Epiphany

The Transfiguration: February 19, 2023

“Goosebumps”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this last Sunday of the Epiphany. I hope to see many of you mid-week for Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. However we don't go into Lent quietly today as we read both Old and New Testament scriptures that contain a rather supernatural, or shall we say mystical element to them.

Well, I know I am in the right place. Since I was a child reading Heinlein's science fiction; as a teen watching *The Exorcist*, much to my parents' dismay; to having my own mystic experiences, I can honestly say that those stories left me with goosebumps. This scripture, when explored, can do the same thing. Truth is always stranger than fiction.

Both Moses and Jesus climb to a mountaintop - which is why when someone has a deep spiritual awakening they may use the words “a mountaintop” experience. But why the mountaintop? Well, visually speaking, a mountaintop is probably the highest place and therefore considered the closest place to the heavens, or should we say the residing place of God. Stories abound throughout history of humans' desire to commune with God.

But in the Exodus story as it plays out - God leaves Moses' face shining as if he had a radiation treatment. And, of course, for Jesus his whole self is transfigured. But what is contained in both stories at some point is that God

is to be feared, his voice sets the earth to tremble, and that is where I want to go today.

Fear and trembling, imagine being on those mountaintops. Hair standing up on the back of your neck. That must have been what it was like to have accompanied Moses as he disappeared into the fiery cloud on Sinai. Maybe goosebumps arose for those covered by the cloud at the Mount of Transfiguration. Fear and trembling all around, goosebumps and all. What is everyone afraid of?

They are afraid because they see something they cannot explain. A cloud blazes with fire into which Moses disappears. Jesus, shimmering in light from an unseen, inner source while talking with Moses and Elijah. No one had ever seen such sights.

The apostles were shielded from the radiance of the light by the thick fog of a cloud, only to hear, in fear and trembling, the voice of God. Fear and trembling. Throughout Holy Scripture those are the words which describe; at all times, and in all places, the meeting of humans and God. "The Lord is King," the psalmist sings, "let the people tremble...let the earth shake."

The God of fear and trembling is all-powerful. The God of fear and trembling is distant. The God of fear and trembling is high and exalted. He is a stern judge and a king whose deeds surpass human understanding. And in a strange way people are comfortable with this God. They are comfortable because they know how to act in his presence. They bow down in craven fear, knees shaking, eyes covered and bodies pimply with the little mountains of gooseflesh.

You never can approach this God of fear and trembling and you cannot live in covenant for fear of your life. And that's the trouble with the "fear and trembling" perception of God. We have found a way of dealing with it and never have to see God face to face. We never really meet the God of fear and trembling.

Left to ourselves nothing would have changed. God would remain distant and we would be bowed down, immobilized by fear; bowed down like Peter, James and John, a little numb and shocked, separate from God.

But you see, God did not create us to be distant from Him. God did not create us to be separate from each other. And God got tired of it! God decided to do something about it. Many times throughout our story as God's people we see God moving towards us to show us who he is. Prophets try to tell us who God is. However, they call to their people when they have strayed so far that the burden of sin leaves them again in trembling and fear. If God gets too close, human beings fall down trembling or turn in fear facing their backs towards God.

God decided to do something about it in a new way. The new way is Jesus. Jesus looks like us, he walks and talks like us, he laughs and cries like us, he bleeds and dies like us. God decided to come among us as one of us, and Jesus reaches across the gulf of fear and trembling and touches us and says, "Get up. Do not be afraid."

God comes among us in our own image, in order that we can see that **we** are God's image.

It is not that God has a body like you and me. But at the core of who we are, we are God's likenesses in this world. It was this likeness to God that was visibly shining through Jesus on the mount.

But exactly what was it that was shining through? Scripture speaks of it only as light, but we know what it is. It is love. God is love. And isn't that enough to give you goosebumps?

We know that love does shine. We've all seen it. We've all seen someone in love: in the smile on a baby's face, in the eyes of your beloved pet, or perhaps it was your own face in the mirror. The eyes are bright with a new sparkle; the smile is radiant, the cheeks aglow.

That's how God wants to be seen by us - as love making radiant all of God's creation. All of it, mind you - especially you and me. God wants us to shine with the light of that love, just like Moses and Jesus and Elijah.

Here on the last Sunday of Epiphany, we finish the journey started by the bright light of a shining star over the Christ Child, to the Christ Child himself, fully formed, fully human, fully divine.

The old fear and trembling are no longer the final words when we come into the presence of God. There are new words now, "get up and do not be afraid." Amen