

Last Sunday of Epiphany/Transfiguration  
Year C, March 2, 2025

“Peter said to Jesus, not knowing what he said...”

What is there to say when we are confronted with holiness?

A sense of the presence of God that is so overwhelming, adequate words escape us. If I'm there with the midwife when baby breathes its first, what is there to say but “it's a girl, it's a boy” which simply does not address the immense reality that God pulled off another miracle and I get to see it when it emerges from its safety pod. Is this why we avoid speaking with someone whom we know we should be comforting at the recent loss of a loved one, because death is so holy that we just can't find the words? God touches us in death; death is the ultimate succumbing to the Holy arms as they lift us from this life where we thought we were into the life God has always wanted for us.

It is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings: one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah – not knowing what he said.

In Judaism, the Festival of Booths – Sukkot – is celebrated in the fall, four days after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement and highest of holy days. Sukkot is a joyous festival instituted in the Book of Deuteronomy which celebrates the harvest, life and our dependence upon God for all that sustains us: no strenuous work is allowed, rather a time for feasting, family and friends. The building of a dwelling, the Sukkah, is central: three walls with a roof of tree branches providing some shelter while allowing sun, moon and stars to shine through. The three walls are said to represent in turn the arm of God, God's forearm, and God's hand, holding the occupants in God's loving embrace. If Peter is referring to such dwellings, why is it that Peter does not know what he said? He's in shock. Jesus invited him and two of his buddies to pray together. All was just as at any other time until Peter, James and John notice a change in Jesus' face and his “dazzling white” clothing. And there they are, three ordinary people, looking on as legendary prophets – Moses, giver of the Law and Elijah, the prophet who never died – chat with their rabbi. Peter seized upon whatever words deep within him that might honor what was happening, no matter how insufficient.

What do we say when we are confronted with holiness? We call it out for what it is. All that is Holy, all that is good. Praise God in God's Holiness.

But on the flipside of the coin, what do we say when we are confronted with evil? God has given each of us the ability to make choices and we are everyone of us just as capable of choosing good over evil as evil over good.

There's so much disagreement these days about what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be religious; the percentage of folks who claim to be religious is constantly shrinking. If we avoid going to church because we are afraid we've sinned and are going to hell because we had a cigarette after we promised we would stop smoking, a) if that's going to happen, it will happen whether or not we go to church, and b) contrary to popular opinion, God is not an angry God. One way I might define the Bible is the history of God standing in our midst with open arms, yearning for a hug. I run out into the middle of the street and hear someone calling me to come back; I see the car coming and run back home and hear Mom and Dad urgently yelling and then feel their arms around me.

We don't talk about evil, just as we don't talk about Evil's first cousin, Sin. We have all seen Evil, face-to-face. And just as when we are confronted with the Holy, it can render us speechless.

Sin is what we do to activate Evil and it turns us away from God towards another god. Evil is often difficult to resist: it can offer us a front row seat, it can increase our bank accounts, enrich our investments, put us at the front of the line. Over decades beginning in the 1950s, a charismatic Jim Jones, founder of the Peoples' Temple, convinced hundreds that he was the Second Coming. He began by ministering to many disingenuous and neglected, became active in the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, moved his temple to San Francisco where at times he had over 3,000 followers, and was ordained a minister by the Disciples of Christ, a mainline Christian denomination. He preached an anti-capitalist social gospel, a gospel of fairness to all, not just the few. Somewhere, Jones took a wrong turn and began to identify himself as divine. This all ended abruptly in the Jonestown death-by-suicide of just under 1,000 believers in 1978. I mention this, because I remember Hal - my rector at the time - standing in the pulpit and asking "how do we know the difference? He said so many things that sounded like Christ: love each other, give away your possessions, share what you have with those who have nothing, read the Bible .... how could we know he wasn't Jesus come again?" If it's all about the person promoting themselves, turning us away from God, how can it be from God? What does the Lord require of us? Not self-promotion, but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

As difficult as it can be to find words when we are confronted with either holiness or evil, as we prayed in this morning's collect, may we in faith behold the Light of God's countenance and be strengthened to name the Holy, to name the Evil; to run away from the evil into the loving embrace of the Holy.