

Jesus in a box

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

Luke 9:28-43a

Today is another one of those “special” Sundays that come along in our lectionary, it’s Transfiguration Sunday.

Now before I go too far, I want to remind you of exactly WHAT the lectionary is...many of you have heard me talk about it often enough.

The lectionary is a group of scripture lessons that have been selected to tell the story of our faith over a period of three years. That is, every Sunday and every Holy day has a specific scripture assigned to it and, in total, they move through the majority of the Bible and cover all the major teachings to be found there. Of course, some topics repeat every year, like Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and the like. Other lessons will only come by once every three years.

The Lectionary includes a reading from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the Gospel and the Epistles. Occasionally there are two readings from one source as different lectionaries have been compiled over the years. The goal is to provide a means of exploring and explaining the Gospel Good News on a regular basis.

Some of the readings will “move” to different times, due to the dates of Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week and Easter being movable. For example, the earliest that Ash Wednesday can fall is 5 February, but that won’t happen again until 2285. The latest Easter can fall is 25 April, but that won’t happen until 2038. As those dates change the calendar of readings adapt as well, but still, the basis is the same; proclaim the Good News using the entirety of the Scripture.

Personally, I think it’s a good discipline, one I tend to follow, as it means I have to continually challenge myself to look at the scriptures with fresh eyes.

And scripture changes.

Now before you accuse me of heresy or the like, hear me out. Over the years of my ministry, I have read some parts of scripture dozens or even hundreds of times. But scripture still has the ability to surprise me.

Perhaps it's a new interpretation, one that puts a new twist on an old story or sheds new light in a way I hadn't considered before. Perhaps it's a re-read that strikes a new chord in me because the words didn't change but I have changed. When my life experiences change the person I am, that "new person" occasionally finds a new message in the old familiar words.

So, in essence, the scripture HAS changed, at least for me. And sometimes I share that change with you.

Unfortunately, many people, many of us, are uncomfortable with the idea of a changing scripture. These are the folks who want simple, absolute answers, preferably answers that match their existing belief system.

These are the folks who want to keep God in a box.

You know what I mean: those who selectively read sections from the Old Testament as "proof" that homosexuality is a sin but prefer to ignore all the laws of required sacrifice saying they are no longer necessary. Or ignore the prohibition against divorce.

Unfortunately, sometimes life gets complicated. Or maybe, just maybe, it really IS simple: We just make it harder than it needs to be, probably because we're not sure what else to do...and we have to do something!

Today's Gospel reading is the story of the transfiguration...it's always read on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. You just heard the story: Jesus is on Mount Tabor and He, Jesus, the Light of the World, begins to glow! And the first reaction of the disciples is to want to box Jesus in and keep His Good News for themselves. Here we see Peter and the others wanting to build "dwellings" or "booths" on Mount Tabor for the glorified Christ and the prophets with whom he appears, grounding them in this one time, this one place.

I suspect we all have a little bit of Peter in us: Our first instinct is to build a booth around our view of Christ and hold on to a view of Jesus we're comfortable with...which, ironically, looks a lot like us. We want to keep Him in a box. Honestly, I think the more expansive view of the Scriptures, the one that invites us, challenges us, convicts us and redeems us is a bit too scary for most.

You see, we want to keep Jesus in a box because then we don't have to worry about things, things like US, changing.

But that's not the way of things. We are invited by the transfigured Christ to hold our images lightly, not to limit the expansive love and light of Christ.

Once, a very long time ago in a small European village there lived an old man whom everyone considered infinitely wise. Wherever the villagers needed advice, they came to the old man's door and knocked. In the same village there lived a number of rough young men. The young adults came to resent the old man, for he has so often been correct in his counsel. So, for once, they were determined to prove him wrong.

The young ruffians caught a bird and decided to ask the old man whether the bird was dead or alive. If he said it was dead, the one holding the bird would let it fly away. If he said it was alive, then the one holding it would squeeze it to death before opening his hands.

They went to the old man's house and said, "Old man, we have an important question to ask you. Is this bird dead or alive?" The old man thought for a minute, then answered, "it's all in your hands."

That's the danger of trying to put Jesus in a box. It's comforting, of course, to believe that we have the absolute answer to every question and we are tempted to grasp that sense of "right" very tightly indeed. But that doesn't allow for growth, or maturing, or growing wisdom. Keeping our faith, keeping our Christ, held tightly in a box makes the old man's answer correct for us as well...it's all in our hands.

One spiritual writer that I sincerely respect phrased it this way: "Hold all things lightly, or you will leave no room for God to work."

Perhaps another way of putting it would be; Hold all things lightly, for you have the power to crush or to give life.

Of course, if we are to be brutally honest, that is one of the motivations behind our desire to keep Jesus in a box. We want a simple faith based on the Bible stories we heard as children, not a confrontational faith that challenges how we live our lives as adults in today's world. A simple faith built upon laws, not a deep faith, based on Grace.

This past week our sisters and brothers in faith in the United Methodist Church voted to renew their ban on gay ordinations, gay pastors and gay marriages. In fact, the new church law prohibits any Methodist pastor from performing a gay wedding. The penalty for the first offense is 1-year suspension without pay. A second offense is to be dismissed from the church.

One of the more eloquent speakers in favor of this ruling was a bishop from Africa who called upon tradition, a close reading of the Old Testament and his interpretation of the New Testament to justify his position. Yet I can't help but find it ironic that this proclaimer of absolutes is, himself, a practicing polygamist, having more than one wife.

We hold tightly, so very tightly, don't we?

And I am no better than any other. A long time ago in my ministry I was challenged by a student I was supervising regarding gay marriage. He asked if I would perform a gay wedding. The first, and easy answer was to say "no". His logical follow-up question was "why not"? And I realized I didn't know.

Oh, I had lots of cultural baggage that provided an answer. Lots of "common knowledge" that could be used. But a solid, faith based, grace given answer? No. I was holding on far too tightly and not letting God have space to work.

Friends, when two people or groups encounter each other, they either deal death or give life. We can deal death in lots of ways besides the obvious; we deal death when we criticize, belittle, misunderstand, ignore, boast, and insist on our own way.

We give life when we notice, affirm, thank, listen to, rejoice with, and encourage others. We are transfigured and transformed by God's grace when we are able to extend life to others.

But we can't do that when we keep our Christ in a box; tied down, shut in, safe and sound in our way of thinking for all the "stuff" of life around us.

The transfiguration story wasn't simply about Jesus. It was so much more. It was a living example of our journey as well as we are bid to listen to Jesus and imitate His life, reflecting and expanding God's glorious light to all the nations.