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Hilfield Friary
Sermon for the Sunday next before Lent

Exodus 34: 29-end
2 Cor. 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36

It's hard to know what to say on a day like this. At Morning Prayer today we heard the Psalmist cry: "The nations are in tumult!" So true. There is a war in the Ukraine, we are still feeling the impact of the COVID pandemic. Signs of global warming are everywhere, feeding into the frequent violent storms, for instance. While there is much that is truly dispiriting and wrong with the world, our job is to pray through these things, and look for God's invitation to keep on seeking him, keep faith with our core values, the gifts that have been given to us in Baptism: the gift of prayer, of incorporation into the Body of Christ, the incalculable blessing of the Holy Eucharist. These are the tools we are given to claim the world for God. Never have I anticipated Lent more than I do this year—because it is a season saturated in life-giving stories and skills and sacraments. We need these resources to be doing the works of God in the world today. That we never seem to be able to achieve perfection, to capture it all—this is the nature of what it means to be human. Things are incomplete, but we can only make a healthy difference by sharing the faith we have. That is what it means to be a person of faith—to keep on doing these things of supreme value, remaining faithful to the works of mercy and compassion, proclaiming God's love. If we do that God will show us next steps.

In this morning's Scripture from Exodus, we have the vision of Moses and his encounters with God that leave his face shining so that he must veil his face. The shining is a sign of his intimacy with God. Jewish scholars have different ways of looking at the veiling/unveiling. One idea that I find very arresting is that Moses' face was veiled to prevent the people from attempting to

idolize him, from putting all the power and authority on him. In effect he is saying not my glory but God's. If he wasn't Jewish I might wonder if Paul wasn't anti-Semitic in his comments to the Corinthians, but St. Paul picks up on the image of veiling to make the point that the Jewish leaders' were unable to see or understand Jesus' message—their minds were veiled. This Scriptural use of veiling in different ways makes it a rich image. I wonder what are the ways I want to make idols of people, places, things? How do I need to be shielded from this idol-making impulse? What are my blind spots that prevent me from seeing the work of grace in the world around me?

In the Gospel we see Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop, in conversation with Moses and Elijah. They are all unveiled, engaged in a face-to-face encounter. What more could anyone desire than that? Those three disciples are able to experience the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Surely the experience of a lifetime. Peter's is the voice of humanity. He wants to preserve that moment, capture it if you will and make it something static. Could you call it an idol? He was attempting to make the encounter of Jesus, Moses and Elijah into an object perfectly adjusted to our human needs. And, as one scholar has pointed out, it is a wish that is part of the human experience of Revelation. When we are gifted with something as extraordinary as what we read about taking place on that mountaintop, we want to cherish it, hold it tight. Perhaps keep it private. How many people have told you their religion is a private thing, and they decline to share the joy that is in them?

So many times, I have experienced in my life something that strikes me as exceptionally beautiful, precious. A meal followed by an impromptu musical jam session illuminated by fireworks in Glasgow is something I wanted to last forever. I felt like it may have been one of the best evenings of my life. Dancing with the brothers in the Solomon Islands—sweet! Holidays

with my family (not every one, but in recent years, more so) I have hated to see come to an end. I remember when I was chaplain at a church youth camp in 1986 the young campers wept at the closing Eucharist, which happened to be the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6. They hated to see the camp end. They wanted it to go on and on. But they had to go down the mountain, back to their lives and share the joy of their God-given experience. What I have learned about all this frustrated desire is that any thing that I think of as perfect must be frustrated. It must be frustrated to keep me in hot pursuit of God. So the mountaintop vision/Revelation is fleeting and Jesus leads the three disciples down the mountain. The desirable vision was so compelling it was one to keep them moving towards God even when events that followed seemed to negate everything. And I think it keeps us moving towards those situations that baffle, frighten or annoy us. They are moving towards Jerusalem, Jesus' trial and death on the cross.

Franciscans do not believe that Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for us, that God required that death of him. We believe he died on the cross out of love. His love put a check on the unspooling violence and gave us an example of love that could heal and transform the world.

We see in the world today tremendous violence being unleashed. A war in the Ukraine! This was presumed to be unthinkable after the devastation of WWII, and the establishment of the United Nations. It is perhaps a perfect example of human desire run amok, unchecked. Putin and the oligarchs' desire for power. But what are we to do? We are the base, the defenseless ones, but not nearly as at risk as the citizens of the Ukraine and Russia who don't want a war. On the one hand I don't think there is anything I can do. On the other hand, perhaps, this is a moment of seeing the world as it really is. We live in a world with two forces at work: in one direction we are pulled by passion, rivalry, injustice in one direction, and in another direction (perhaps not accidentally) the Gospel many Christians are hearing today articulates something very different.

The voice from heaven says “This is my Son, my Chosen: listen to him!” We can listen to warmongers and get caught up in the spiral of violence and provocative, hot-headed rhetoric. Or we can actually take a moment to listen to Jesus, and walk the way of the cross, bringing encouragement to those we meet, words of healing, building human resilience wherever we can. This must translate into actions of protest and resistance. Collective action is a powerful tool. No matter their bluster, leaders look at polls, consider the optics. Why do you think they arrest protesters? they don’t want any hint of objection to their plans. Silence means acceptance. It is dangerously easy to become disillusioned and nihilistic, saying the world is a terrible place, nothing we do matters, we are all going to die a terrible violent death, the rich criminals that command the armies will always win.

No, love wins. It will always win. Wars will happen, people will suffer hunger, unjust incarceration, climate degradation. But inspired by love, listening to the Chosen One we can find ways to keep God’s vision and dream for humanity alive. I spent part of Thursday morning listening to prisoners in African prisons one after another testify to the power of God’s love. Incarceration in a modern British prison is bad enough, imagine what it must be like in Kenya. But if they can, so can I! It is up to us to keep the message of God’s grace alive. We are called to find the courage to love without guarantees or requirements. This witness is our vocation, universally shared by all Christians, and worked out in a multitude of ways. One of those is learning to relinquish the many strategies we have employed to feel safe and in control. It’s about taking risks to bring attention to the needs of the most vulnerable. We must counter the negative death-inflected narrative with a life-giving one. Here at the Friary as we walk the way of the Cross this Lent, we will be seeking to become more attuned to how we perceive the world, how we perceive God and to practice ways of living that draw people into God’s embrace.

Listen to Jesus. He is the Chosen One—and go with him down the mountain to face the demons of war, pestilence and lies that are flinging us to the ground, threatening to destroy our world community. Jesus is the Light of the World, illuminating the darkest places. Hold tight to him and let his light shine.