

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday March 3, 2019 Sundi Gras
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Transfiguration – Luke 9
Theme: Until our Faces Shine

There is a dreamlike place that our tradition offers us where the wild pageantry of the dark unknown elements of the soul are unleashed and celebrated for a season in Carnival. It is a little hard in Albuquerque to get this feeling as the frivolity and celebration of carnival never took firm root here despite the Spanish lineage. But if you have ever lived in New Orleans, or Mobile or Montreal or Quebec City or Germany or Brazil or one of the many places that have a carnival tradition, you may know something more about the wildness around this season. St. Mark's does what it can to bring a little of the flavor of Mardi Gras to our particular community. Before the Church asks us each to consider dying to ourselves in the self-reflective time of Lent, we are allowed to cut loose for a bit, to embrace our shadow side briefly, in a kind of daring and make-believe way.

Throughout history in every part of the world, civilized societies have recognized the deep need to allow chaos to reign if only for a brief moment. While we tend to think of ourselves as enlightened and cultivated people moving toward some inevitable "progress," there is considerable wisdom in honoring and admitting to the foolish and dark side of our lives.

One of the things I love about Mardi Gras is its constant love affair with opposites. The ubiquitous twin masks with joyful and sinister faces are a clue to the deeper meaning and purpose of this season, in its honoring of the dark, unexpressed aspects of human life as well as our capacity for joy and celebration. The figures and costumes and untamed shapes that walk the streets during Carnival in big cities make this clear: Men dress up as women, women dress up as men. People take the permission given in this brief time to wear revealing costumes or to put on their alter ego of evil and the fiendish. Those who feel inferior tease and goad those who elevate themselves. Bigger than life political leaders are ridiculed and lampooned for what people see beneath their facades. The rich are made poor, authority is dethroned and fools rule for a night or two. Anarchy and rebellion hide not only in the hearts of the "youth of today" but in all our hearts and can only be honored safely in ritual.

Sunday after our Mardi Gras party and with a Jazz Eucharist is an interesting time to preach. There is a buzz of excitement as the energy of revelry hangs in the air from last night. And each year on this Sunday, the Last Sunday of the Epiphany Season, the last Sunday of Carnival season we are given the same incredible Gospel story of the Transfiguration to contemplate. We are fortunate here that we have a festal icon of the story to communion with and allow it to pull us into the story itself.

We are told by the writer of Luke that Jesus took three of his inner circle, Peter, James and John with him by themselves up a high mountain. It was near the midpoint of Jesus' journey. There was considerable tension and opposition to his ministry from the religious elites of the day where were making things increasingly difficult for Jesus. Jesus' own disciples didn't seem to understand their teacher's message very well and kept jockeying for position. It is near this time that Jesus began to talk with his disciples more and more about the nature of suffering, about their inevitable return to Jerusalem and his odd reference to the cross, that menacing symbol of Roman domination and cruelty, brutal but effective control. More and more Jesus' speech was filled with mystery and paradox about losing one's life in order to save it. Not long before their trek up the mountain Jesus had asked his disciples who they thought he was, and Peter, wonderful Peter, had blurted out a most amazing answer. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." As strange as it was, Jesus did not contradict him but began to talk more openly about the struggles and difficulties ahead.

In the midst of all of this, Jesus took with him Peter, James and John for a hike away from the crowds and controversy. And there on the mountaintop something extraordinary happened.

After a 45 minutes climb, Peter, James and John found themselves on the top of Mt. Hermon. Their hearts were pounding, they were tired but intensely alive as they took in the view around them, light dancing on the valley below changing with every moment. We are not sure what occurred, but they called it transfiguration, which means "change" or "metamorphosis." We have the story in the sparsest of detail. First the memory of his face shining like the sun and his clothes, blazing white- filling them with awe and terror. There is no terror like that of the utterly familiar suddenly changing in front of us, revealing things we have never expected. Then there was the realization that they were no longer alone on this high place. They were witnessing with God-given ability some kind of visitation across time and space. We have little description, no record of the images or pictures that led them to their recognition of Moses and Elijah. We are told only that their friend and teacher Jesus, was engaged in a conversation with the most revered men of old.

The three disciples look on in wonder, spectators viewing a meeting across space and time, like children with their faces pressed up against the glass, gaping and wide-eyed. They do not know what to say or do. The veil between heaven and earth is lifted if only for an instant and that is all that they could take.

Peter breaks the spell, speaking to Jesus, wanting to say something, to do something, to be helpful. He is looking for a way to hold on to the mystery- harness the glory and terror, like buying the recording of a performance that moved you to tears.

But no, it cannot be that way. Suddenly a cloud covers the mountain, a thick mist blowing over the summit. The vision is hidden from view and the three begin to regain their senses. And then a voice comes out of the bright cloud speaking

something strange and wonderful. What they had sensed in their hearts is now made overwhelmingly clear, their friend they climbed this mountain with is far more than any friend, he is himself a mystery for which no language exists save that of awe and worship and holy terror.

“This is my Son, My Chosen; listen to him!” These are the words the three terrified disciples hear, and indeed they are the words we are meant to hear as well. Shaken by holy terror the three disciples probably huddled against the ground hiding their faces until Jesus came to them and touched them back into the present, speaking words of kindness, “You can get up now, no need to be afraid any longer.”

They did not speak of the event again until after Jesus’ death and only then because it seemed important as they began to puzzle out who their friend actually was. For they had begun to realize something uncanny. The glory of God shone not just in the transfigured face of Christ on the mountaintop but also in the disfigured face of Christ – the face that bore the pain and anguish and woe and sin of the world. The face that shone on the mountain was also the face they saw on the cross.

Both are the faces of God. Just as the truth of humanity is found in the wonderful opposites of Carnival masks, the truth of God is to be found in these opposites as well.

This is not a God who stands aside from trouble and cruelty of the world, this is not a God who does not understand the pain and sacrifice of this world or the darkness and chaotic forces at work within each of us. This is a God who knows the world as it is, a God who can see through the masks of joy and pain to the wholeness of each of his creatures. This is not a God who is immune to suffering and grief. This is a God who was not only on the mountaintop but who also walked the road to the cross. This is a God who knows what it means to suffer and who weeps with those who suffer.

This is a God who can deal with our humanity in its fullness. It is a God who is not afraid of the darkness and depravity of the human soul nor is this a God duped by our higher ideals and posturing or our talk of human progress. This is the God who has fearfully and wonderfully made us and intends to save us. This is the God who draws us into relationship with him through both his Glory on the mountaintop and his suffering Glory on the cross. Here is good news for Revelers; having a God who is not afraid of our dark waters is something to celebrate.

At moments in life, whether through tragedy, joy, sudden insight, or prayerful searching the masks each of us wear tend to fall away revealing our true faces and the truth of our own humanity. In those moments there is an opportunity to catch a glimpse of God’s face, replete with all the dazzling brightness of that day long ago on a high mountaintop. In those moments, whenever they come for you, there is the opportunity to be changed, changed into the likeness of Christ. Will your face shine with the love and compassion and mercy of God? To encounter Christ is to find our

true faces, to have no more need of masks, and to shine with the Glory of God in this world which so desperately needs the good news of Christ.

“This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!”

Listen until your faces shine.