

A sermon preached at by the Reverend Deacon Timothy Ervolina as St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina, on The Last Sunday After the Epiphany (18 February 2007):
Exodus 34:29-35, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Luke 9:28-36

And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen

Luke 9:36

It was hot, Africa hot. Steaming hot, jungle hot, blood hot. Hate hot.

On April 22, 1994 Séraphine Mukamana had come to the convent in Sovu, in the south of Rwanda, seeking refuge from the militia weaving drunken and murderous through the country side. The nuns hustled her and her neighbors in the garage. Outside they heard the screams of their friends, the sickening sound of machete on bone, the jeers and songs of the murderers. The African sun beat down on the tin roof, but nobody moved, for fear they would be found. Then one of the children, whose parents had already been slaughtered, began to weep. The militia turned around and began shouting, "There are cockroaches in here! Come out, cockroaches!" Séraphine and her friends sat silently, praying that God would conceal them. Finally, the militia leader began shouting for the nuns. One of Séraphine's friends peered through a hole in the wall. "The nuns are coming to help us. They are bringing gasoline." And sure enough, Séraphine could see Sister Gertrude and Sister Kisito carrying large cans of gasoline. But the gasoline was not to get the militia to drive away in their pick-up trucks. A moment later the refugees smelled the gasoline fumes and heard the hot flames licking against the door.

A month into the Rwandan holocaust, 100 terrified Tutsi refugees fled to the Shyogwe Diocesan office to escape

attack from the Hutu militia. A couple of weeks later, 400 Hutu refugees fleeing reprisals also showed up at Anglican Bishop Musabyimana's door. A few days later, a red pick-up truck filled with Hutu soldiers and militiamen arrived, demanding Tutsi blood. The Bishop met them at the diocesan office door. He made it very clear that it was not fitting that the Tutsis be slaughtered on church property. The Hutus, being good Christian people, and in full submission to their Bishop, did as they were told: in the neighboring village of Kabgayi, one hundred bodies of his baptized flock were thrown into a mass grave. Still, there was not a drop of blood on the altar of the Cathedral of Shyogwe.

And so we sit, a decade later, and shake our heads. How could that happen? How did the most Christian nation in Africa, where the most powerful institution after the government was the Christian Church, have baptized itself in the blood of its own children?

Perhaps the story of the Transfiguration can help us. Luke says it's eight days after Jesus has asked the disciples who people think he is, and who they think he is. That's Luke's way of telling us that someone's going to have something unexpected revealed. An Epiphany. On the eighth day after Jesus' birth, his parents present him at the Temple, and Anna and Simeon see all the promises to Israel in the face of a sleeping newborn.

On the eighth day after the Resurrection, two disciples join a strange traveling preacher on the road to Emmaus, and spy the Risen Lord tearing a loaf of bread.

On the eighth day after Peter had blurted out the words on everyone's lips, Jesus grabs Peter, James and John, by the arm and says, "Boys, we're taking a little hike this morning." It was Epiphany time. They make their way from the seaside village of Caesarea Phillipi up the winding mountain path to the summit of Mt. Hermon. It's a tough hike, even if you're in good shape, up the 9,230 feet to the top. Below them, the snow is melting into dozens of little streams combining to form the headwaters of the Jordan River.

When they get to the top, Jesus kneels down to pray. And that's when it happens.

It's as if the sun is no longer shining down on him, but bursting out from him. His clothes glow with the blinding radiance of Hermon's snow. Luke doesn't even try to explain what happens next; it just is what it is: Moses and Elijah, the lawgiver and the prophet of prophets, are standing right next to Jesus. Peter, James and John are slack-jawed. They hear Moses saying something about Jesus going somewhere. They hear Elijah saying something about Jerusalem.

They are tired, these fisherman, after the great hike. They rub their eyes. Perhaps they're dreaming. But all three are in each other's dream. Finally, Peter speaks, his words tumbling around like a fishline in the jaw of a giant red snapper. "Jesus, you know it's really a good thing you brought us up here with you, me and John and James that is. I mean, its' going

to get dark soon, and we're on the top of the mountain, and you've got, these, well, these visitors and you know, maybe we need to start gathering something sticks and make some kind of shelter for your friends and you and Jesus, is that guy really Moses?" But Jesus doesn't even seem to hear Peter and Peter, James and John can't quite make out what he's saying to his visitors.

Just how far up on the mountain they are becomes clear as they realize that there is a cloud drifting over them. But it's not one of those wispy summer puffs of water vapor--this is a dark, mountain of a cloud, a cumulonimbus colossus, throbbing with thunder and pulsing with lightening. The cloud swallows them, and they fall down with their hands over their heads, their skin stinging as the wind blasts the sand into their faces. All three of them hear it at the same time. It wasn't the wind. It wasn't the thunder. It wasn't the lightning. "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

When they looked up, the sun was setting cross the Naftali heights. The cloud was gone. The strange visitors were gone. Jesus sat there alone. Later that night they whispered to each other, "What happened up there? Was it real? Was it a dream? Who were those guys and where did they go?" And as they fell asleep, their hearts knew that the man who slept alongside them was no ordinary man. He had been changed right before their eyes, but instead of being changed by that knowledge, they chose to be silent.

When Peter had blurted out the week before that Jesus was the Messiah of God, Jesus knew that Peter and his friends had no idea what that really

meant, what it would take to be transformed into Messiah's followers. Jesus knew that they had to somehow see his change, in order to begin their own change. He decided to show them that he stood in the very line of Moses and Elijah, and that God was calling him to a destiny in Jerusalem. So he chose a mountain-top experience, like the one Moses had given the Hebrews a millennium and a half earlier, on another mountain in the far peninsula of Sinai. But all that holiness, and all the changes it demanded, was way too scary.

When Moses had come down the mountain, there was something about him that made the people look away. Moses' experience of God was so real, so transforming, that it scared the people around him. They knew they were in the presence of someone who had been in the presence of God, but they made Moses wear a veil, since all that holiness was a bit unsettling. That way they could keep silent about they had seen in Moses' face, instead of being changed by it.

The whole purpose of this last Epiphany of Epiphany season, this mountain top experience of something shining, new and powerful is to change us. It's to form us into a people who know what it means to say we follow the Messiah of God. It's to keep us from being silent about what we've seen in Jesus' face.

That's what went wrong in Rwanda. The people who said they were following the Messiah of God—the One who loved his enemies, who forgave those who murdered him, who spread grace out like Mount Hermon spreads its snow—stayed silent. They put a veil over Jesus' face, because all that holiness and all that it demanded was way too scary.

In the early 1990's, in the villages of Rwanda, they say there were Christian preachers who baptized thousands. They say there were great miracles, they say the people sang in tongues of angels. They say there were prophets whose faith could root out an adulterous woman or a homosexual from underneath the Virunga Mountains. They say there were preachers who could unravel the mysteries of the universe. They say that some of them took vows of poverty.

But they lacked something. And without that one thing, their songs became dirges banged on gongs, their miracles only an illusionist's tricks. They did not have the one thing that is patient and kind; the one thing not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. The one thing that does not insist on its own way; that is not irritable or resentful; that does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. The thing which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The one thing that never ends. Love.

So they had nothing but empty, false religion. Atheism dressed in blood red vestments.

The final Epiphany of Epiphany gives us the reason for all the rest: that we can be transformed by looking at him. That we can bear all things, endure all things. So that we can look in the face of those who think they are our enemies and say "I love you." So that they can see the transformed figure of Jesus in our face and love us back.

The demonic power of hate that has ravaged Rwanda and the rest of Central Africa, that burns yet in Iraq and Afghanistan, on the train tracks of Madrid and the in London Tube, will never be conquered with bombs. Those

who have declared themselves our enemies will not be transformed by more guns, more barbed wire, or the crush of more boots on their necks. They can only be transformed by the one thing that changes everything: love.

What would happen if every Sunday every Christian congregation began to pray for Osama Bin Laden or Moktada al Sadr? What would happen if Christians around the world refused to be silent any more about what we've seen in Jesus' face? What if we really believed that listening to Jesus meant being changed by him and loving our enemies with his reconciling love? What would happen in the world?

We see all this in a mirror, dimly; in a cloud, darkly. And it's very scary. But in the midst of the wind, the thunder and the lightning comes the voice of God: "This is my Chosen One, listen to him." Listening to him means not being silent any longer about what it means to follow the Messiah of God. It means refusing to cover our heads, refusing to look away from the Transfigured One. It means loving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us. It means being changed, and living as if we really believe that Jesus is the Messiah of God.

Amen.