

“The Chosen One”
Epiphany Transfiguration C
Luke 9:23-43a

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In Jesus' Name.

Epiphany is the season of light, the light that makes Christ known. It began with the Wise Men following the light of the star to Jesus. Who is this child born to Mary, over whom Joseph stands guard? The Wise Men gave him gifts fit for a king. So he is a king. At Jesus' baptism we heard God's voice declare from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." So he is a king and a Son, of God no less. Epiphany kept the spotlight on Jesus as he traveled around Galilee. We witnessed him turn water into wine, cast out demons, heal the sick, attract crowds with his teaching, and orchestrate a record catch of fish. But there is something else upon which Jesus threw the light switch. He asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered on behalf of the twelve. "You are the Messiah of God." Messiah is the Hebrew word meaning anointed one. Christ is the Greek word meaning anointed one. Israel's kings were anointed into office. Peter identified Jesus as the heir of King David.

Peter said, "You are the Messiah of God." Jesus replied, "You are right, and I must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise.' Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.'" Nothing in the disciples' experience with Jesus and nothing in centuries of expectation for a promised messiah prepared them for the way Jesus talked about his death and cross-taking-up as the logical consequence of being the Messiah.

Jesus shines Epiphany light on the cross and the cross casts a long shadow. In the shadow the disciples ask, “Are you sure this is the way? We liked it better back at the wedding banquet when you turned water into wine and the party lights were shining. We liked it better when you called up the miraculous catch of fish. We liked it better when you healed Peter’s mother-in-law. We liked it better when you showed your mastery over unclean spirits. We liked it better when the crowds swarmed around you and the shine on you reflected over on us. We don’t like the shadow. We don’t like standing in the shadow.”

The mother of a friend of mine wrote an email to her dear ones. “I have a new insight into Psalm 23,” she writes, “and I thought you might like to see it. “Yea, though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

“Up ahead on a hill is the image of death [for Jesus it is in the form of a cross, for this writer it is] in the form of congestive heart failure, which will indeed come for me,” she writes, “if intervention (or something else) doesn’t come first.

“But BEHIND that image is the dazzling bright light of God’s redemption, resurrection, the light that raised Jesus from death. That light is why the image of death, viewed from this side, is so dark. And that’s why death casts its shadow down here in the valley where I am still slugging along.”

Jesus took Peter, John, and James up that mountain in order to show them the other side of death. On that other side were Moses and Elijah. On the other side was an appearance of Jesus in his resurrected glory. On the other side was the voice of God declaring, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.”

“My Son, my Chosen,” God called him. What we often mean by the word chosen is something akin to teacher’s pet and mom’s favorite. It is someone tapped out from the rest of us

for special honors and status. That is how the leaders understood the word later on in Luke chapter 23 when they “scoffed at Jesus saying, ‘He saved other; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’” But in the Bible the word is used in the portion of Isaiah from which come the servant poems, the suffering servant poems. Isaiah 42 begins, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom by soul delights....”

Chaim Potok’s first novel is titled “The Chosen.” In this novel Danny Saunders is the son of a rabbi of a Russian Hasidic community. Hasidic Jews are ultra orthodox. The movement arose in the 18th century in Eastern Europe. There are many variations and different groups, each centered around a rabbi. To outsiders it can look much like a personality cult. He is much more than pastor or teacher. He is called a tzaddik, which literally means a righteous man. It is an inherited position, passed down father to son. Rabbi Saunders is the sixth generation of his family in that position. His status as head of the community is heightened also by the fact that he led his people out of Russia in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution. In a period of lawlessness, marauding bands had killed half their community. He led the survivors across Europe and finally to safety in America. His oldest child Danny is the Chosen, the one destined to be the seventh generation of his family to be rabbi of their community.

The relation between father and son is odd, one designed, it seems, to cause the son anguish. Rabbi Saunders tries to explain himself, “When I was very young, my father... began to wake me in the middle of the night, just so I would cry. I was a child, but he would wake me and tell me stories of the destruction of Jerusalem and the sufferings of the people of Israel, and I would cry. For years he did this.... And when I was old enough to understand, he told me that of all people a tzaddik especially must know of pain. A tzaddik must know how to suffer for his

people.... He must take their pain from them and carry it on his own shoulders. He must carry it always.... Even when he dances and sings, he must cry for the sufferings of his people.”

He must take their pain and carry it always, I would add: even when turning water into wine while the party lights are shining; even while calling up a record catch of fish; and, even while taking his disciples to the other side of death to show them resurrection. Jesus is the tzaddik, the Righteous One, who suffered for us, who even now takes our pain upon his own shoulders and bears it to his grave.

The conversation on that mountaintop was a serious one. Jesus talked with Moses and Elijah about the time people would speak of him as the dearly departed. Elijah knew something about flashy exits, fiery chariots and all. The departure they talked about was literally the exodus – that is the word used – he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Moses was the one with exodus experience, having brought God’s people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus will break death’s shackles in order to lead the exodus from slavery to sin. That old master can no longer crack the whip and determine how our lives turn out.

We live on the shadow side of the cross. We have been shown the resurrection side, but we live on the shadow side. This account serves as a transition, a hinge on the doorway that now opens on the road to Jerusalem and the exodus Jesus accomplishes there. Come Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we turn with him. We are Christened, anointed at baptism into the office of Chosen People. You can tell from the way our gospel reading today ends that things often do not go so well for God’s chosen ones on the shadow side of the cross. In fact this is the first of four quick episodes in which they are shown to be the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time disciples. The episodes could as easily be about us. First of all, they failed to exercise Christ’s Lordship over the unclean spirit. Then Jesus said, “Let these words sink into your ears: I am going to be

betrayed into human hands.” But they did not understand. Then they fell into an ugly argument about which of them was the greatest. Finally, they worried over the credentials of one who was casting out demons rather than worry over those who were oppressed by the demons. In short order they were revealed as the not-quite-ready-for-prime-time disciples in terms of power, understanding, humility, and sympathy. As my friend’s mother describes it in her email: We are still slugging along in the valley in the shadow of the cross. “But I am not alone,” she continues. “I remember the words on the poster I saw and loved years ago, I think from Augustine: All the way to heaven is heaven, for Christ said: I am the way.” She signs off, “Think on these things. Love, Mom,”