

“Persistently Present”

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

Throughout my childhood, I never had to walk more than three blocks to school; but between my house and all of my schools was the major obstacle of Route 22, one of the most notoriously dangerous highways in New Jersey. We had to cross at a particularly dangerous intersection that was the scene of numerous accidents, and is even tricky for adults to cross on foot. But we had one constant source of security that made our crossing far safer: Mr. Fry, our crossing guard. Mr. Fry was present every morning to help us cross the highway on our way to school, and he was there at the end of the school day to guide us safely home. Many things changed during my childhood, but there was one constant: the persistent presence of Mr. Fry, who made certain that I could get to school safely and then return safely home.

The assurance that there are people who are persistently present in our lives is a source of great comfort in many situations. Knowing that we have good friends who will be persistently present to share both times of joy and times of sorrow gives us confidence in knowing that we are never alone when we face all with which life presents us. Knowing that we have good doctors to care for our medical needs, good dentists when our teeth need attention, and good accountants when we need help with our taxes reassures us that there are people who are persistently present when we are faced with situations where we cannot deal with these challenges on our own. Knowing that there are police officers, firefighters, emergency response personnel, and other aid workers who are persistently present to assist us in times of crisis gives us that sense of security that is essential to live together in an ordered society. People who are persistently present are essential for us to live each day with a degree of confidence that we will not be faced with dangers that we cannot deal with on our own.

Throughout this season of Epiphany, we have been invited to consider who Jesus is and what his presence among us means. At his Baptism, the voice from heaven clearly identifies him as *“my Son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (Luke 3:22). In his changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, Jesus *“revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”* (John 2:11). After reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus declares that his presence is a sign to them that *“today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* (Luke 4:21). It has been a season that falls between our celebration of the birth of the child who fulfills the promise of the coming of *Emmanuel* – “God with us” – and our observance of the Lenten season in which God’s Will in Christ is fulfilled in his death and resurrection, in which the fullness of Christ’s glory is revealed.

At the end of the Epiphany season is this Sunday in which we remember the Transfiguration of Our Lord, when *“eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up the mountain to pray.”* (Luke 9:28). The “sayings” that Luke refers to are Jesus’ declaration *“the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* (9:22); and his instruction to the disciples that *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* (9:23). Eight days later, Jesus chooses three of these disciples – Peter, along with the brothers John and James – to accompany him *“up the mountain to pray,”* a common occurrence in Jesus’ life. But what happens on that mountain is most uncommon:

- “And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly he saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” – 9:29-31.

Like Moses, whose “*face shone because he had been talking with God.*” (Exodus 34:29), Jesus’ appearance confirmed his presence with God. It is also a further disclosure of Jesus’ divinity as God’s Son and a foreshadowing of his resurrection and ascension, which is the “*departure*” about which he speaks with Moses and Elijah, the representatives of the law and the prophets that Jesus has come to fulfill (“*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*” – Matthew 5:17). The “*fulfillment*” that is discussed in this *theophany* – divine appearance – is what Jesus “*was about to accomplish in Jerusalem,*” his passion, death, and resurrection that was one of the sayings he had shared eight days before he reveals to these three disciples the fullness of his divine identity.

- “The Transfiguration also serves to confirm the last part of Jesus’ passion prediction. The story will not end with Jesus’ death; on the third day he will be raised and ‘enter into his glory.’” – Walter Brueggemann.

As significant is the appearance of Moses and Elijah, they soon withdraw from the scene – but Jesus remains present with his disciples. Even though “*Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.*” (9:32). Wanting to commemorate this occasion for future generations, Peter proposes that three “*dwellings*” or booths be constructed; this may relate to the fulfillment of Israel’s celebration of the wilderness wandering at *Sukkot*, the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (“*Speak to the people of Israel, saying: On the fifteenth day of this seventh month, and lasting seven days, there shall be a festival of booths to the LORD.*” – Leviticus 23:34). But Peter’s proposal shows that he has only partially grasped the significance of this event; he wants to freeze the moment and commemorate the place, “*but faithfulness will require following Jesus to the cross, not commemorating the place of the Transfiguration, which – fittingly – is not named in any of the Gospels.*” (Brueggemann).

The true significance of this event is made apparent when “*a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.*” (9:34). As at Mount Sinai, where there was “*a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled*” (Exodus 19:16), the disciples are overshadowed by a cloud in which the voice of the Lord speaks to them: “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*” (9:35). Echoing two Old Testament verses (“*You are my son; today I have begotten you.*” – Psalm 2:7; “*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights*” – Isaiah 42:1), the divine voice provides the fullest answer to the question of Jesus’ identity in Luke. Jesus is both the unique Son and the chosen Servant in whom God delighted and through whom God would bring salvation to the nations. But while this pronouncement is very similar to the divine voice that speaks at Jesus’ Baptism, it adds a command to “*listen to him!*” The command to listen to Jesus follows the departure of Moses and Elijah; Jesus’ disciples are now to listen to him – and him alone.

When Moses came down the mountain after being in the presence of the Lord, he came down alone; God’s presence continued to dwell on the mountaintop. But when the three disciples descend the mountain of the Transfiguration, Jesus accompanies them, because the Lord whose divine glory had been revealed to them is “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have beheld his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*” (John 1:14). The second part of today’s Gospel lesson serves as a counterpoint to the account of the Transfiguration. On the mountaintop, God affirmed his Son; now a troubled father asks for help for his only son:

- “Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.” – 9:38-40.

After lamenting over “*you faithless and perverse generation,*” those who would reject the Son of God who had been sent to save them, Jesus invites this distraught father to bring his epileptic son to him. As in other

exorcism accounts in Luke, the power of the demon is demonstrated in a final violent convulsion before submitting to Jesus' power: "*While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions.*" Unlike in earlier episodes, this time the demon does not call out Jesus' identity ("What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are the Holy One of God." – 4:34), because now Jesus' identity has been confessed by the disciples and declared by the voice from heaven. Similarly, the response of the crowd is not a question but praise to God for Jesus' mighty act: "*And all were astounded at the greatness of God.*" (9:43).

The Transfiguration of Our Lord is more than a celebration of Jesus' divine nature, a confirmation of our faith in Jesus as "*true God, begotten of the Father in eternity*" (*Small Catechism*). It is an affirmation of our confidence that God is with us always, a fulfillment of the Christmas message that "*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'*" (Matthew 1:23). It is the answer to the question posed in the Christmas carol: "*What child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is sleeping? ... This is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing*" It is our assurance that in the Incarnation God has chosen to dwell with us, and our confident hope that is rooted in Jesus' final words in Matthew to "*remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (Matthew 28:20). It is the basis for our hope in God's eternal presence, sharing in Paul's conviction that "*neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:38-39). Our faith is rooted in our sure and certain hope that ours is a God who is persistently present in all aspects of our lives.

It is this persistent presence of God that is celebrated in Psalm 99. While this psalm shares much in common with other "enthronement" psalms ("*He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!*" 99:1), it is unique in its use of the theme of holiness as a pervasive structuring concept. In the Old Testament, "holiness" normally designates the awesome presence of God that evoked fear and required human beings to keep their distance or to approach God only after making special preparations or taking special precautions ("*You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, 'Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.'*" – Exodus 19:12). As this psalm proceeds, however, holiness is defined in very different terms. Rather than keeping human beings at a distance, God relates to them doing justice and righteousness, answering cries, and both forgiving the people and holding them accountable:

- "Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob ... They cried to the LORD, and he answered them ... O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings." – 99:4, 6, 8.

God is not enthroned above the struggle of human relationships; rather, God is intimately involved in them. As the prophets make clear, justice and righteousness have to do with the concrete, daily realities of human existence and relatedness, especially in regard to provision for the poor and needy.

- "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." – Amos 5:24.
- "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" – Micah 6:8.

For God, holiness means not transcendence but immanence, not inseparability but involvement. God is involved with a particular place and with a particular people in the struggle for justice and righteousness. The incarnation of Jesus is the ultimate redefinition of holiness: "*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*" (John 1:14).

Like Psalm 99, the Transfiguration redefines holiness and sovereignty in the direction of committed involvement and suffering love. As the people beheld the "greatness of God" at the healing of the child, God is

the Holy One who is persistently present in their midst; *“for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”* (Hosea 11:9).

- “Because the Holy One is committed to being with us and enacting justice and righteousness among us, it is fitting that Jesus taught us to pray, ‘hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.’” – J. Clinton McCann.
- “Jesus Christ is true, essential, natural, complete God and human being in one person, undivided and inseparable... the right hand of God is everywhere. Christ, really and truly placed at this right hand of God according to his human nature, rules presently and has in his hands and under his feet everything in heaven and on earth.” – Formula of Concord.

Even though Route 22 remains a most dangerous highway (I am reminded of this every time I drive it on my visits to New Jersey) I can't remember ever feeling afraid when I crossed it on my way to school, because I knew that Mr. Fry would always be there to safely guide us across that roadway. Throughout my life, I have been blessed with people who have shared all of the joys and challenges I have encountered and have given me the strength and comfort of knowing that I am not alone in any circumstance. In the revelation of Christ's full identity on this day of his Transfiguration, we have the assurance that we are always in the persistent presence of our Lord, and therefore *“even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me.”* (Psalm 23:4). As Christ accompanied his disciples down the mountain and remained with them, we also have the confidence to sing out that *“I know the LORD is always with me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.”* (Psalm 16:8). No matter what our circumstances may be; no matter how many trials and tribulations we may face; no matter how difficult our life's journey may be – we walk together in trust and hope, because we know that our God is persistently present with us always in the eternal presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom nothing and no one can separate us. Our Lord is present with us always – *“we have God's own promise, and that cannot fail!”* Amen.