

February 14, 2010

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

### “Dazzled”

TODAY, just in case you have been able to overlook the red hearts, flowers, cupids and other reminders in the stores, newspaper advertisements and flyers, local schools, hospitals and some business offices, TODAY IS VALENTINE’S DAY: a celebration of love. Initially it was a celebration for romantic love, but since that reduces the gift purchasing activity, today Valentine’s Day is a celebration of all kinds of love—between parents and children, friends, classmates and so forth.

Love is dazzling. When I think of this, I remember a favorite film my family has enjoyed over and over: *The Princess Bride*. A grandfather comes to stay with a sick grandson, bringing with him a book to read- the story of a Princess Bride. As you can imagine, the boy is extremely dubious about this. The title does not appeal, it doesn’t seem to imply any promise of adventure, bravery, fighting, danger, horror or courage. The grandfather assures his grandson that the tale includes all of those things. The boy reluctantly agrees to listen. The story opens telling of a beautiful girl and her servant, the farm boy. She orders him around and he obeys her every command, gently murmuring the words, “As you wish.” The grandson stops his grandfather at this point, vehemently objecting to this horrifying relationship. Because it is clear, the servant is totally dazzled by his love for the young woman. And the boy is not interested in hearing any more of this. The grandfather prods him to stick with the story, which does quickly turn to adventure and danger.

When I think of dazzling love, that opening scene of *The Princess Bride* comes to my mind. When we love another, we often begin by being dazzled- in romantic love, in the miraculous gift of a child, a grandchild. We are enthralled; our eyes sparkle; our hearts are amazed, joyful.

Our Scriptures today speak of “dazzling” events.

Moses, who had led his people out of slavery in Egypt, encountered God high up on a mountain peak. He came down from Mt. Sinai where he had met and talked with God. Although he didn’t know it, his face “shone”, the Bible tells us. The brightness of the shining DAZZLED the people- to the point where they were afraid of him. He called to them, and the leaders

finally went to Moses and heard what he had to say. Moses then realized that his face shone with such light that it overwhelmed his people. Out of love for them, he covered his face.

In our Gospel text Jesus went up on a mountain with his followers Peter, James and John. As he prayed there, his face changed and his clothes became “dazzling white”. He talked with Moses and Elijah. The light of God enfolded them all.

So dazzled, Peter spoke—babbling about a crazy plan, “not knowing what he said”. God interrupted him, speaking from a cloud, saying, in effect, “This is my Son whom I love- don’t talk- listen to him!” Peter hushed. They all hushed, and “told no one any of the things they had seen.”

Thinking about all of this, I’ve concluded, “Okay. God is love. God is the Source of all love. So when we give or receive human love, it makes sense that we’d be dazzled. Because these Scriptures show us that the love of God, radiating from his power and presence, is so bright and dazzling human words can’t even seem to describe it. So here we are, on Valentine’s Day, and I think God wants us to recognize the mystery and intensity of love—and to recognize that love is WAY more powerful than we commonly think. Just like the love story in *The Princess Bride* encompasses WAY more than the boy sick at home at first thinks.”

When we are dazzled by love for our beloved, our children, however, we feel joy. When the people of Israel were dazzled by the glowing face of Moses, and when Peter, James and John were dazzled by the transfigured Christ, they didn’t feel joy—they seemed to be primarily afraid. What’s that about? It certainly seems that the DIRECT FACE TO FACE experience of God’s presence, power and love could explain this. I am sure that is a part of the story, but not all of it.

God’s love is dazzling. We are meant to be dazzled, and by being dazzled, also transformed.

The thing about love, you see, is that it changes us. In the first flush of being “in love”, for example, it appears that all of those changes are delightful. We see ourselves through the eyes of our beloved, and we are amazed to discover how appealing, charming, intelligent, talented, cherished, treasured and insightful we really are!!

As we gaze at our newborn baby sleeping in the moonlight of a darkened room, we are amazed at the change in our hearts; the desire to protect, to nurture seizes us; the tenderness we feel is unlike any other we've experienced, and we are filled with joy.

Love is changing us, making us new and different. However, as time unfolds, we begin to see that change is being demanded of us, that isn't so thrilling. We are being changed in ways that are difficult, hard. We may feel our transformation is a little like tree pruning- limbs we loved are lopped off. Or it feels a little like being smushed into some kind of new mold that squeezes and crushes us in painful ways.

Love, all of which finds its source in God, is dazzling. We are meant to be dazzled, and by being dazzled, also transformed. It seems, that although we don't necessarily feel afraid AT FIRST when we are dazzled in experiences of **human** love, we may feel afraid down the road. And when the people of the Bible WERE AFRAID in the presence of GOD'S dazzling loving power, they just got to that fearful part immediately. For us, the fearful part comes when a spouse gets cranky, loses a job, is injured or gets sick. It comes when babies wail, when children's needs are multi-layered and hard for us to understand. It comes when aging parents deal with dementia and we have to care for them.

When we get to the scary part of love's transforming work, I think sometimes we try to take control of the transformation. We don't feel dazzled by light, but afraid of the hurt, the questions, the DARK parts of loving another. Peter, babbling on the mountaintop, suggested building shelters for the shining figures. He wanted to take control of something, in ways he was comfortable with, in the midst of a terrifying experience unlike any he had known. But God calls us let go of control, and let our God of love guide our actions.

We love infant baptisms in the United Methodist Church. We are dazzled by the beauty of the babies and toddlers. We watch their every move, the brightness of their eyes as they gaze at us. We murmur and laugh at their expressions and gestures. They light up our lives, they light up our worship. We eagerly and readily agree to be "the instruments of God's love in their lives." We are dazzled.

I love doing the baptism preparation classes for these children's parents and other loving adults in their lives. One young father recently made an interesting observation. As we looked over the words of the baptismal liturgy, he took note of the promise the congregation makes, to love the child and do everything possible to help the child grow up to follow Jesus and claim the Christian faith. He chuckled, then commented, "I wonder if the congregation in my church didn't regret making that promise when I was growing up. I was pretty much a holy terror!"

Love calls us to let go of comfort and control, to accept the hard parts of loving, to yield to transformation as God makes, remakes and shapes us.

I recently heard a radio program that shared the story of a couple who were dealing with the husband's experience of Alzheimer's disease. I was deeply moved by the love between them. I talked about this program with my daughter who lost her first husband to cancer at the age of 33, after a five year battle. I shared my awe at the strength of the woman journeying with her husband through the jungle of Alzheimer's. I told my daughter how amazed and moved I was by her journey through the unbelievable pain of losing her husband. I said, "I don't know if I could do it. But I guess, with God's help, I would, if I had to." She said simply, "Yes, Mom, you could do it and you would and will, if you ever have to." I gave her a hug.

God's love is dazzling. We are meant to be dazzled and by being dazzled, also transformed. We aren't in charge of the transformation. God is. But God's mighty hand can make and shape us to be instruments of his love. God's love and power help us do whatever he asks us to do, in the name of love. If he asks us to help children by sharing a financial gift with United Voices for Children, he will give us the means to do that. If he asks us to walk with a loved one through illness, he will give us the means to do that.

I'd like to close with some words from an article by Barbara Brown Taylor:

***[Jesus] died very much like those who died on either side of him, one of them begging to be saved from what was coming, the other asking to be remembered when Jesus got to where he was going. Jesus could not do anything for the one who wanted to be spared, but he did a great favor for the other. He told him that the darkness was a dazzling one, with paradise in it for both of them.***

*I think it was something he learned on the mountain, when light burst through all his seams and showed him what he was made of. It was something he never forgot. If we have been allowed to intrude on that moment, it is because someone thought we might need a dose of glory too, to get us through the night. Some people are lucky enough to witness it for themselves, although like Peter, James and John, very few of them will talk about it later.*

*What the rest of us have are stories like this one, and the chance to decide for ourselves whether we will believe what they tell us. It is a lot to believe: that God's lit-up life includes death, that there is no way around it but only through, that even the darkness can dazzle.*

God's love is dazzling. By being dazzled we are transformed, made into instruments of divine love. And even the darkness can dazzle. AMEN.