Sermon :: 15-Feb-2022
<u>Epi Last, Year A</u>

" beholding by faith the light of His countenance,
[let us] be strengthened to bear our cross "

A funny thing happened to me on my way to this sermon: I got into a fight … with the *dictionary!* Now, ordinarily, dictionaries are some of my closest companions: I keep the Merriam-Webster's online unabridged open on my computer at all times … and I consult Wiktionary (yes, that's a thing!) several times a week. But, sad to say, in *this* instance, they let me *down*.

You see, as I began reflecting on today's gospel reading … the word *IMMISTAKABLE[1] leapt to my mind and wouldn't let go—more of the reason *why, anon*. Concerning the *fight,* let me summarize it as follows: When I went to look up whether the word IMMISTAKABLE has an *E* after the *K* … my good friends at Merriam-Webster *and* Wiktionary *both* insisted there was *no such word*—that the correct English word is UNMISTAKABLE (no extra *E,* by the way). So, I confess, I went down something of a linguistic 'rabbit hole' … trying to find *any* authority for IMMISTAKABLE—even as far back as the fourteenth century. (This is, I know, *way* much insight into how my fevered brain operates!) But to no avail: The word is, and apparently always *has* been, UNMISTAKABLE.

Nevertheless, I am holding *firm:* The word *should* be IMMISTAKABLE. It's easier to say … sounds more mellifluous … and even has a law of phonology[2] to back it up. (Don't worry, I'm not going to burden you with *that!*) All of *this,* then, to say that today … I insist on preaching to you about the message of IM-MISTAKABILITY that lies at the heart of Jesus' Transfiguration!

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For this is *exactly* what the Transfiguration is all about: the IMMISTAKABILITY of Jesus as the Son of *God*. You see, the disciples are hopelessly confused. In the previous chapter of St Matthew's gospel, Jesus has asked them who *other* people say Jesus is (answer: basically, another prophet). And then Jesus asks them who *they* say He is … to which Peter replies, "the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" (Mt 16:16). DING, DING! Peter goes to the head of the class … but only for a *minute*. For when Jesus then tells them that *as* the Son of God, He must be killed and then rise again … Peter *recoils:* Say it isn't *so,* Lord! This must *never* happen to You! Jesus rebukes Peter's insolence … and makes it crystal clear that in the *new* Kingdom that Jesus has brought into this world … *He* must *die,* so that *all* may *live. Furthermore,* Jesus tells them, those who want to follow me,[3] must take up their *cross* and *deny* themselves: In in order to *save* your life, says Jesus, you must *lose* it for My sake.

A *Messiah* who must *die?* A *Savior* who says we must *lose* our lives? A Feeder-of-Thousands who insists we *deny* ourselves? You can almost *see* the quizzical looks … *feel* the sweaty palms … *hear* the anxiously quickening heartbeats: Who *IS* this man [|] we *thought* we *knew?* Have we made a *big MISTAKE?*

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[1] Or perhaps, if you prefer, IMMISTAK*E*ABLE.

[2] This is the principle of gemination: *i.e.,* when certain combinations of consonants travel together, the first one often morphs to 'twin' (hence, GEMINI – gemination) the second. Thus, *i*n*r*eplaceable becomes i*rr*eplaceable, and *i*n*m*obile becomes i*mm*obile. Maybe I'm stretching the rule a bit since it's *un*mistakable and not **in*mistakable … but hey, I am standing my phonological ground!

[3] This is the meaning of "come after" in the NRSV translation: to follow along behind.

And so, God sets out to make Jesus … *IM*MISTAKABLE. Jesus takes three disciples[4] up a high mountain with Him … and there, God transforms Jesus' appearance into a dazzling radiance of resplendent glory … and then God proclaims, in the disciples' hearing, "This *IS My Son,* the *Beloved;* … *listen* to Him!"[5] And there it is, at last: the IMMISTAKABLE proof … the incontrovertible evidence … the unassailable sign … that Jesus *is* the Son of God. Let there be not a *shadow* of a *doubt*—make *no MISTAKE:* The Man Who will be killed on Calvary and then be found, raised again, at the Empty Tomb … *IS* the Anointed One—the very One Whom Israel, and indeed the whole *world,* has been awaiting … for salvation.

And *now,* all that 'lose your life in order to save it' stuff Jesus said begins to make *sense:* God's IMMISTAKABLE intention, for those of us who would be Jesus' disciples … is that just as *He* says … just as *He* does … just as *He* sacrifices … so, *too,* are *we* to say; are *we* to do; are *we* to sacrifice … to lose *our* lives, for *Jesus'* sake. Take up you *your* cross and *deny* yourselves, God says … since, like *Him,* I am going to raise *you* up, again, in glory.

In gospels[6] filled with occasionally *mysterious* sayings … sometimes *cryptic* parables … often *unfathomable* miracles … the Transfiguration is a rare moment—maybe the *only* moment—of complete and utter IMMISTAKABILITY: He *IS* My Son … He *IS* your Savior … and as His followers, He *IS* the pattern for *your* lives, as well.

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And so, as we sit here, at the intersection of Epiphany and Lent … of the season of *Jesus'* glorious *God*-li-ness, *revealed* … and the season of *our* inglorious all-too-*human*-ness, *confessed* … we confront an uncomfortable question: How will others know *us* to be the *children* of *Christ* … as *IMMISTAKABLY* as the three disciples, up on that mountain, know *Jesus* to be the *Son* of *God?* What are the IMMISTAKABLE signs *we* show … the IMMISTAKABLE words *we* say … the IMMISTAKABLE sacrifices *we* make … to confirm, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that *we* are part of Christ's eternal presence in this world?

The answers are myriad and varied, for each of our lives is unique. *But,* I would offer, there *are* some *universals* … some 'core *principles'* … of Jesus' that we should seek to live out in our lives:

- We are IMMISTAKABLY Christ's disciples when we *assess* and *respond* to … when we *vet,* and then either openly *support* or actively *oppose* … the actions of those with the greatest power, the greatest wealth, the greatest influence in this world … through the lens of *Jesus' love*. ¶Do they *respect* the inherent holiness of every human being … or *trample* it underfoot? ¶Are they building a world that seeks to lift others *up,* in freedom and with opportunity … or to keep them *down,* in exploitation and under control? ¶Do they exercise *restraint,* lest their *impact* exceed their *wisdom* … or *maximize* their every move, lest anyone *else* get something *they* might have?
  > We IMMISTAKABLY reflect the IMMISTAKABLE Christ … when *His* love drives *our* response

[4] Peter, James and John: in the synoptic gospels, the classic 'inner circle.'

[5] At Jesus' Baptism (Mt 3:13-17), God also says, "This is My Son, with Whom I am well pleased," but adds no command about *listening*. Indeed, Matthew reports no one else's reaction or response to this most dramatic episode; the disciples haven't even been *called* yet. This, it's entirely possible that only Jesus Himself heard—or, at least, registered the importance, these words. (John the Baptist was there, but he is now (*i.e.,* in Mt 17) long dead.)

[6] The gospels according to Mark, Matthew and Luke all contain accounts of the Transfiguration.

… to all the troubling realities just outside those big blue doors.

- We are IMMISTAKABLY Christ's disciples when we regularly, actively and even *conspicuously* seek to comfort, befriend and assist—even *sacrifice* for—those whom this world oppresses, abuses and overlooks. *No one* 'deserves' violence or inhumane treatment … *no one* 'brought' need or want *upon* themselves, all *by* themselves … *no one* 'qualifies' as less-than merely for being different or difficult or even demanding. Jesus went out of His *way* to walk the very margins of society and assist those whom the culture of His day labeled 'unworthy' or 'untouchable' … and we are IMMISTAKABLY *His* when *we* do as *He* did.

- And we are IMMISTAKABLY Christ's disciples whenever, in the face of accelerating *anxiety* … paralyzing *uncertainty* … or spiraling *fear* … we confidently and steadfastly proclaim *hope*. For we *know,* in *faith,* that this world *ultimately* rests in *Jesus'* hands *alone:* No earthly person or force, movement or event can ever *begin* to approach His *power* … His *mercy* … His *grace* … His *love*. Jesus is all-encompassing and all-embracing … and nothing—*nothing!*—that *has* happened in the *last* two thousand years, or *may* happen in the *next* two thousand … can exceed His willingness to *forgive* all … His openness to *accept* all … and His earnestness to *save* all.
  > We are at our IMMISTAKABLE best—our highest, greatest, faithful-est—as Jesus' disciples in and for this world … when, in the face of problems that weaken the resolve of the mightiest mogul; of prospects that quiver the plans of the cocksure-est commander … we, *nevertheless,* find it within ourselves to say: Have *hope* in *Christ:* the blessèd *final word* … the *IM*MISTAKABLE *good-ending* … of *all* that ever will *be!*

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*IM*MISTAKABLE. It's a word I invented … a word I 'fight' for … because, I think, it's a word *we* need to *ponder* … and *we* need to *own:* There *is* no—can *be* no—MISTAKING … in the eyes of the *disciples* … Christ upon the mountaintop: His love and His grace, His peace and His hope.

And so, for us who IMMISTAKABLY *confess* Him … who IMMISTAKABLY *know* Him … who have been IMMISTAKABLY *saved* by Him … let there, *likewise,* be no MISTAKING … in the eyes of the *world* … *Whose WE* are … *Whom WE* serve … and *in Whom* all *OUR* hope is founded.[7]

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[7] See hymn 665 in THE HYMNAL 1982.