



Last Sunday in Epiphany (B)

Strange and Wonderful

[RCL] 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

What a beautifully strange and wonderful story we find in Mark today. Our gospel reading tells of Jesus' transfiguration, an event recounted by all three of the synoptic gospels. There's a lot to unpack here. There's the presence of Elijah and Moses. There's the fear and near comical reaction of the apostles. There's the uncreated divine light shining out of Jesus. And then, of course, there's the voice from the cloud declaring to the disciples the identity of Jesus and commanding them to listen to him.

Before moving through the riches in this text, let us take a moment to remind ourselves where we've been and where we're heading both in the text and in the church year. In the text, Jesus has predicted his death and set his face toward Jerusalem, where he will be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. Following the church calendar, we have arrived at the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season that begins with the feast celebrating God's presence with us. In a way, we have climbed this liturgical mountain by hearing and basking in the stories of the Incarnation. And here we are at the mountain's peak. Here we are before descending into the valley of Lent, that season that prepares us as we journey together toward the remembrance of the cross and celebration of the empty tomb.

Ash Wednesday looms on the calendar, a day that points to our own death with those wonderful and dreadful words: "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return." But we're not there yet! We are here in the Spirit. We are here in the light of God on the mountain at the Transfiguration.

The gift of the lectionary helps us find our focal point; here on this mountaintop, we find transcendence, triumph, and divine mystery. And do take note that it is not on the cross or in the empty tomb.

Before we enter into the penitence and self-reflection of Lent, we are here bathed in light and glory. Theologians and authors like to look at this passage and employ words like "prefiguration," or foretelling of Christ's resurrected glory. And perhaps that is what is happening here theologically and literarily, but there is also something more. The impulse is to jump ahead and to say that this is a foretaste of the glory to come. The impulse is to jump ahead and look across the valley below to the next mountain peak. But there's something else here and now in this encounter between the disciples and Jesus and Elijah and Moses and the voice in the cloud that we must explore.

This transfiguration occurs before Jesus' death. It happens before his resurrection. Thus, literally, this event occurs before even our knowledge of and hope in the Resurrection. The creed says, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." And that is indeed our hope, and that hope colors all of our faith and our life. But even before that hope, there is a divine light shining here in our world. The light of the Transfiguration cries out: God is with us.

In this account, Peter's response is almost comical. Understandably terrified, he says to Jesus, "Let's throw up some houses for you, Moses, and Elijah." As hearers of this text, we have the gifts both of temporal and physical distance from the fear this event would have inspired in the disciples. We know you cannot house this kind of glory. You cannot capture this kind of event in a tent or a dwelling. This is a moment of beauty. Just like a camera cannot ever quite capture the magic in a special moment, one cannot set up a house for the miraculous and transcendent.

So, what does that mean for us today? The rest of our readings give us some guidance. In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, we encounter Elijah, his anointed successor Elisha, and the chariots of fire. We have a similar moment of miracle and of transcendence as Elijah ascends to heaven in the whirlwind. Elisha has been with Elijah step by step and has seen wonders and prophecies. And he knows that when Elijah's time to depart has come, the power of God is not housed in a body but in God's Spirit. It is for this reason that Elisha asks for a double portion of the Spirit. Elisha reminds us that the power and wonder and beauty of God at work in our lives and in our world was happening before the church and before the Crucifixion and, indeed, even before the Resurrection.

Like Elisha, we look for that light and that power in the Spirit. And we look to be that power in the Spirit. From the second epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul's words give us some further guidance. "Let light shine out of darkness." Paul affirms that we are the bearers of the divine light. Jesus shines in our hearts, giving light and reflecting the glory of God from within us. That uncreated light that shone from the face of Jesus and terrified the disciples is now inside us. We are bearers of the divine light.

As the psalmist writes, "Our God will come and will not keep silence." That same Spirit who rested on Elijah and Elisha is the same Spirit who was celebrated by the psalmist. And it is that same Spirit who shines in us. God thunders from the heavens and speaks in the whirlwind and moves as a consuming flame, but God also makes God's presence known to us in the light that shines within each of our hearts. The knowledge of Jesus is that same light. The light within us is divine, for it is only the divine that can open our hearts and our minds to the mysteries of God. Our knowledge of God is always accompanied by an encounter with God. Let that sink in. It is God who shines in our hearts giving us knowledge of the glory of God. Yes, God is always with us. But there are moments when God makes Godself especially known to us. Every time our thoughts turn to God, we have an encounter with God. Every thought we have about God is indeed a thought in and with God.

And so, as we move out of the season of Epiphany, let us hope and pray that we find that divine light. Let us look for that light within us that radiates out with the love of God. For that light is divine. Let us bask in the glory of the transfigured Christ. Yes, he is the one who has died and risen again. But today, he is the one who came to earth, emptying and humbling himself, walking this earth with his family and friends and even his enemies. Let us bask in the mysterious and terrifying light of Jesus, who loved his creation so much that he became incarnate and fully human – God with us.

We look to the resurrection and the life to come. But first, here and now, we look for those moments of divine transfiguration—that transcendent light, beauty, and terror that come with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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