



Everyday Transfiguration

February 14, 2021: The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Oh Lord: take our minds and think through them; take our mouths and speak to them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

This morning we come to the last Sunday of the Epiphany season, during which the Gospel of Mark has been our primary guide to ways in which the message of Jesus manifests itself in the world. The season began back on January 3 when we celebrated the Wise Ones' visit to the newborn baby, and continued with the Gospel addressing each Sunday the question of who Jesus is with a series of Epiphanies: the One who is a vulnerable baby; the One who is baptized and beloved; the One who says come and see; the One who equips others to be builders of a community of disciples; the One who preaches and heals the man possessed by an unclean spirit; the One who heals Peter's mother-in-law; and this morning, the One who is transfigured, shining in glory, joined by revered ancestors in faith. The arc of Epiphany begins with new birth, ends in dazzling brightness.

And Peter, James and John are there. And not only do they get to see Jesus in this altered state, they also have visions of Moses and Elijah. And to a faithful Jew, Moses and Elijah represented the heart of the Jewish tradition—the Law and the Prophets. Moses had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and through the wilderness into the Promised Land. He had received the tablets of the Law from God in a cloud on Mt Sinai. He represented the Law, the Teaching, the Torah of God. Elijah was the great prophet and wonder worker who at great peril to himself had defended the worship of Yahweh against idol worship; had raised the dead; had heard the still small voice of God in the whirlwind; had brought fire down from the sky; and was taken up to the sky in clouds by a chariot and horses. His return was believed to be the harbinger of the coming of the Lord and the end of days. If you have been to a Jewish seder, you know of the custom leaving an empty chair for Elijah. Together these figures would have been a great comfort to Peter and James and John. They were the towering figures of their faith and would have strengthened them as they contemplated the future that Jesus had promised—death and resurrection—whatever that meant.

And then the cloud. The cloud that surrounded them, with Jesus at the center. And again, the Voice that came out of it - "This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him," the same Voice and same words as heard at Jesus' baptism. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke each report the Transfiguration. There are some slight differences in their versions, but the main contours are the same. The placement of the story in each Gospel is similar as well—it comes just after a passage where Jesus foretells his own death and resurrection, and that to be a disciple means to pick up our cross and follow him.

The magnificent Transfiguration story not only comes after Jesus tells his disciples about his death and resurrection, but before we hear, next week in Church, of Jesus being driven by the Spirit into the wilderness. It's almost like we're meant to have deep draught of a powerful spiritual protein and carbohydrate shake to restore our electrolytes and replenish our aching muscles after tough workout, and before a long journey ahead.



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Most of us do not have regular experience of such mountaintop experiences, whether of a kind of spiritual ecstasy, or a vision, or of a comprehensive sense of the big picture, what it all means, or where it's all going. And when we do have them, we might be like Peter, building huts trying somehow to capture that immediate and powerful experience of Jesus and hold on to it.

And that's not such a bad thing, I don't think. I shelves full of little rocks and pebbles, pinecones and rosaries to remind me of times I have experienced the transformative presence of God. I even have videos on my phone of sunrises and singing birds. And that's all good. It's important to have touch stones, and special, joyful places to return to when we need help and healing.

But I think that we're also meant to be looking for the presence of God in the mundane aspects of our everyday lives. As Gerard Manly Hopkins wrote, "The world is charged with the grandeur of grandeur of God...because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

Because we can't live on the mountain top. I spent some time years back living in Seattle during the summers, and periodically would need to look for an apartment. And landlords tried to make the most of any contact that had with Mt. Rainier. So, it was not unusual to see a listing marked with "Peekaboo view" of Mt. Rainier. I think sometimes that's the best we can do. But we can seek glimpses of it every day.

Brother Lawrence, a lowly kitchen monk who lived in a monastery in France in the 1700s, gave excellent spiritual advice to people that collected in a pamphlet called Practicing the Presence of God. Lawrence had been wounded in the 30 Years War in the mid-1600s and ultimately came to a monastery in Paris to spend the rest of his days. Assigned to the kitchen, a place toward which he described a natural aversion, Lawrence learned there to be in constant conversation with God amidst the pots and pans. And people came from everywhere for his counsel.

Brother Lawrence said there are things to be avoided if we want to practice the presence of God, or as I am saying it, practice hearing God speak. One is to avoid the temptation of the **great**. Great deeds, great practices, fancy rituals. You can practice the presence of God doing whatever it is you are doing, wherever it is that you find yourself. The other temptation to avoid is the **other**. If I were some other person, or in some other place, or some other time, I could do this better. You can practice listening for the presence of God wherever you are.

That doesn't mean that we might not have to make some changes in our lives to hear and see better, but it does mean that each of us has all the raw materials we need right at hand. As we prepare for Lent, I invite us to begin to turn our attention to the ways that we can pay attention to the God who is found not only on the mountain top, but in the galley as well.

Amen.