

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 27, 2022 – LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Ultimate Epiphany*”*

Exodus 34:29-35 (Moses' face shines after meeting God and receiving the Law)
Psalm 99 (The Lord is King, proclaim His greatness)
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 (Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom)
St. Luke 9:28-36 (Jesus is transfigured on the mountain before His disciples)

Today is the Last Sunday in Epiphany. Throughout this season, the Scriptures have shown us several epiphanies in the life of Jesus Christ—the word “epiphany” meaning *manifestation* or *revelation*. First, we saw the Star leading the Magi to Bethlehem so they could worship the newborn King of the Jews.

On the second Sunday, Jesus manifested His power to do the impossible, as the Heavenly Bridegroom turning an earthly wedding party's wash water into fine wine. On the third and fourth Sundays, we had an epiphany of the mission given to Jesus by God Himself, as He preached in His hometown synagogue: to save sinners, heal the sick, free the captives, and raise up the marginalized. Then, on the fifth Sunday, Jesus as the giver of all good things was revealed to the sailors in their miraculous catch of fish. On the sixth and seventh Sundays, we were shown epiphanies Christ's wisdom, mission, and ministry, through His paradoxical teachings about God's “upside-down kingdom,” in the Sermon on the Plain.

Finally, this morning, we are led up a mountain, to witness the most brilliant epiphany of all, that of Christ revealed in all His divine glory. Scholars believe the Transfiguration of Christ likely took place on Mount Hermon, which rises over 9,000 feet and is located in northern Israel, near Caesarea-Philippi.

Verse 28 actually begins, “About eight days these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. . . .” You might wonder, “Eight days after *what* sayings?” It was eight days after Simon Peter had his own major epiphany, when Jesus asked him, “Who do people say I am?” and Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, blurted out: “You are the Christ of God!”

But let's continue the story. St. Luke writes that Jesus “took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.” This, in itself, is an epiphany: Even Christ, who was God in-the-flesh, needed to go off by Himself and pray. Why? Surely Jesus was in constant communion with God the Father. Wouldn't His thoughts and God's thoughts be the same? And yet, Jesus felt the need for a time of sustained prayer. What does this say to us about our priorities?

The Rev. Peter Storey, a South African Methodist minister who later became a bishop, wrote about his time working with the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu during the struggle against apartheid many years ago. He recounted that often those fighting against the legally enforced racial segregation would come into Johannesburg and rent a room for the night, where as many as ten men might be staying in one room.

One night, Rev. Storey recounted, he was awakened about 4:00 in the morning by a shuffling sound over in the corner. He looked and saw a man sitting there with a white sheet covering him. It was Archbishop Tutu, retreating from the world for a few minutes, beginning his day in prayer. At other times, Tutu would leave the work to go away for a couple of days, making a silent, contemplative retreat.

Finally, Rev. Storey decided to confront Tutu: “Out there, young men and women are dying. How could you leave the movement for two days a month?” Bishop Tutu answered, “I leave and go on retreat for two days a month, so that I can do the work God has called me to do the other 28 days.”

We don't know why our Lord felt the need to go off and spend time in prayer. Maybe it was because His ministry was so draining. Anyone who works with people, meeting their needs, consoling them in times of distress, helping them find healing in a time of heartache, will understand. After all, we believe that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine. And, as human beings, we all need time and space to recharge. We need to spend time apart with God to renew our sense of His presence in our lives, and to soak up His peace.

Maybe that's why Jesus went up the mountain to pray. Perhaps being continually in the public eye, healing and ministering to thousands of people at a time, pulled His focus and energy away from God and more toward His exhausted self. So, Jesus took time to be in the Father's presence as a way of energizing His mission once again. We, too, need to remember to recharge *our* spiritual batteries when we start running on empty.

Today's Gospel continues: "a cloud came and overshadowed them; and ... from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'" Here on the Mount of Transfiguration we have the most spectacular epiphany of all. We see Christ in His full divine glory, as both His appearance and His clothing were illuminated like a flash of lightning. And with Him are the two leading lights of the Old Testament, the prophets Moses and Elijah. Topping that, we hear the very voice of God: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him." *Imagine!* Christ revealed on earth in His Heavenly Glory! Peter had already announced that Jesus is the Messiah. But the other disciples may not have been convinced. Yet, at that moment, perhaps they were coming to realize there never was, or ever will be, *anyone* who can *ever* compare to Jesus Christ.

In the 19th-century, a German sculptor, Johann Heinrich von Dannecker, was known for his statues of Greek goddesses, as well as one of John the Baptist. But his finest sculpture was one he did of Christ. For two years he worked on this sculpture.

When it was finished, he called to some children playing outside his studio and asked one of them to come in and evaluate his work. "Who is that?" he asked. A little girl promptly replied, "A great man." Dannecker knew instantly that his impression of Christ had failed. So, he undertook the project once more. For the next six years he toiled with his chisel to recreate the masterpiece. This time when the statue was completed, he tested his work again. He asked the same child to identify the new statue. "Who is this?" he asked. This time the girl answered: "It's Jesus!"

The sculptor later confessed to a friend that during those six years Christ had revealed himself in a vision, and he had simply transferred that vision to the marble statue. And what a magnificent job he did! It was said by those familiar with his work that his portrayal of Christ's face "was so tender and beautiful that strong men wept as they looked upon it."¹

Perhaps, as Peter, James, and John experienced Christ in all His glory, they, too, were tempted to weep. For, if there had been any doubt in their minds before that Jesus was the Christ of God, the One who was, and is, and is to come, those doubts were gone in a flash after what they experienced on that mountain. In today's Gospel, we are privy to one of the holiest moments in Scripture, the climax of The Epiphany, and a type of experience many of us feel is missing in today's secular world. Can we even find words to adequately express the radiant glory and absolute holiness of God, for which in the depths of our souls, we yearn?

Earlier this winter, I began listening rather obsessively to a CD of praise music by a Messianic Jewish group that sings in both Hebrew and English. And upon hearing God praised in Hebrew, the language spoken by Jesus and His disciples, I discovered a profound and powerful sense of awe, reverence, and worship that was totally unexpected. Take for example, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God of Hosts:" In Hebrew, it is "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai, Elohim, Ts'evaot." Hearing that, was the first time I realized that's where we get "Lord Sabaoth" in the hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

I'm not suggesting that you (or I) take up Hebrew lessons. I'm just making the point that all human words, no matter how beautiful, fall short of expressing fully the greatness of our God, through Whom *all things* are possible, and for Whom *nothing* is impossible.

I kept wondering why the Transfiguration of Christ occurs in our Sunday Gospels *twice* in the Church Year—in the winter, on the Last Sunday of the Epiphany, and again in the summer, on The Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6. Perhaps it's because we need to hear God's words from that mountain height, *twice*: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him."

Are we listening to Jesus? Do we take quiet times apart to simply *be* in His presence? Are we hungry to experience His glory, majesty, and holiness? As we journey toward Lent, may God grant us humble hearts that take time apart to pray; give us grace to hear His Son's voice; and fill us with reverence and awe as we worship Him in all His glory. Amen.

¹ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 7 February 2016, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. King Duncan, "The Ultimate Mountain Top Experience," [Sermons.com](https://www.sermons.com/sermon/the-ultimate-mountain-top-experience/1467613), 2013 <https://www.sermons.com/sermon/the-ultimate-mountain-top-experience/1467613> 4 February 2016.