

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 11, 2024 – LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Jesus Christ—God’s Light in our Darkness*”

2 Kings 2:1-12 (Elijah is taken up into heaven, and Elisha inherits his spirit)
Psalm 50:1-6 (God will come to judge with righteousness)
2 Corinthians 4:3-6 (The light of the Gospel is veiled to unbelievers)
St. Mark 9:2-9 (Jesus is transfigured on the holy mountain)

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” These words from the Creation story are recalled in today’s reading from St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. The Apostle writes, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

In early 2022, a new simulation of the universe’s origins using massive computing power allowed scientists to explore what might have happened in the earliest days of Creation. In the early days after the Big Bang, for the first 150 million years or so, light could not travel very far at all. “It’s a bit like water in ice cube trays; when you put it in the freezer, it does take time, but after a while it starts to freeze on the edges and then slowly creeps in,” writes Physicist Aaron Smith, a NASA Einstein Fellow at MIT’s Kavli Institute for Astrophysics and Space Research. “This was the same situation in the early universe—it was a neutral, dark cosmos that became bright and ionized as light began to emerge from the first galaxies.”¹

In today’s readings, the light which illuminates our understanding of the Divine is a bit like that light at the dawn of the cosmos. Comprehension is not instantaneous. Even when the revelation of God descends in a moment of transfiguration, a whirlwind, or a chariot of fire, it takes us humans time and reasoned thought to understand and respond.

On this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Gospel lesson always tells the story of the Transfiguration—another of the Bible’s mysteries. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each give an account of this in their Gospels. While small differences reflect each author’s particular interests and literary style, the main thrust of the report remains the same: Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain where He is transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah show up, and a Voice from heaven informs the disciples that Jesus is God’s Son and commands the hearers to listen to Him.

The story is both mysterious and miraculous. If we, as 21st-century hearers of the text, find it somewhat bewildering, those present at the event were just as confused. Indeed, one of the themes that weaves together today’s Lectionary readings highlights the reality that confusion often comes before understanding. And, *that’s all right!*

In St. Mark’s account, Peter asks if he should construct booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Biblical commentators have pointed out the comedy of this impulse. Surrounded by glory, light, and brilliance, Peter shows himself to be thoroughly practical.

The transcendent light of Christ’s holy and divine presence stands in stark contrast to the metaphorical darkness that shrouds Peter’s and the other disciples’ lack of understanding. They simply do not comprehend what is happening around them. Even when standing face-to-face with the glory of God, they still don’t get it, and have no idea what to do. Frankly, I don’t think we would, either.

This lack of understanding is echoed in our Old Testament lesson from 2 Kings. Like Jesus, Elijah is preparing to depart this world. He has his disciple, Elisha, accompanying him. [By the way, *Elijah* in Hebrew means “He is my God,” and *Elisha* means “My God is Salvation.”] Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind, and three times Elisha refuses: “As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.”

Finally, the pair come to the Jordan River. Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up, and strikes the water. The waters part, and the two cross on dry land. Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit, and Elijah replies, “If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you.” The chariots of fire come, and Elisha sees Elijah taken up in a whirlwind into heaven.

While the reading for today ends there, the story is not quite over. Elisha turns to the Jordan River, takes Elijah’s mantle, and just like his teacher, strikes the water. And nothing happens. He then says, “Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Where is He?” He takes the rolled-up cloak and hits the water again. This time, the water parts as it had before, and Elisha crosses to the other side.

In this story, Elisha sees the glory of God firsthand, up close and personal. He sees the miracle of miracles, his mentor and teacher being taken up to heaven while still alive. And yet, he doesn’t have it all figured out. His first step without his mentor is to falter. He strikes the water and nothing happens. In the next few verses, a group of prophets pressures him into searching for Elijah in the desert. His ministry as a prophet starts off ineffective and uncertain. Elisha is profoundly human. While he may have received a double portion of the Divine Spirit, he starts off like so many of us do: with questions, doubts, and misunderstanding—just like those three disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. The glory of God is revealed, and the human response is perplexity.

In our everyday discourse, the word “epiphany” is usually associated with a revelation of knowledge—signaling those “lightbulb on!” moments when the fog of incomprehension gives way to understanding. But on this Last Sunday of the Epiphany season, the lessons show us that human comprehension of the Divine does not happen instantly at the flip of a switch.

In a way, as Christians we are all still finding our way through a haze of confusion and bewilderment following the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Many of us, like Jesus’ disciples, may be asking ourselves or each other, “What do these things mean?” “Is God truly at work in the world? In the suffering, in the Cross, through loss?” Our 21st-century questions may differ from those of Jesus’ 1st-century disciples. But in whatever way we ask the questions, if we sincerely seek the truth, God *will* give the light of understanding. And like that primordial light at the dawn of the universe, the light of Divine comprehension does not always illuminate everything in an instant.²

Today’s Bible stories, as part of the tapestry of Holy Scripture, witness to the reality that misapprehension and faltering steps are a natural, normal, and human response to the revelation of God’s glory. However, as we step out in faith, responding to each other and the world around us, that Divine light becomes brighter and clearer as it spreads within our individual and communal lives. As we seek to love our friends, family, neighbors, and enemies as Jesus loved us; as we extend no-strings forgiveness to people who have offended or hurt us; as our hearts expand with compassion for the poor and needy—and we do something concrete to help them; as we bow before our Lord in repentance, humility, awe, and worship; in all these ways of living out the mysteries of Christ, God manifests himself in us with radiant glory.

And God is the one who allows us to comprehend what His Divine mysteries mean—in our own individual lives, in the experiences of those around us, and in the world. As slow as we might be to perceive the Divine Light, we can nevertheless trust that it is still there, enlightening, transforming, and redeeming us all. And that Light will remain with us as we journey through the shadows of Lent.

Let us pray:

Guide us, O God, by Your Word and Spirit, that in Your Light we may see light,
in Your truth discover wisdom, and in Your will find peace,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is the Light of the World.³ *Amen.*

¹“Astronomers Reveal Remarkable Simulations of the Early Universe From the Dark Ages Through First Light; New High-Resolution Simulations Show 1 Million Galaxies Forming Some 13 Billion Years Ago,” [Center for Astrophysics | Harvard & Smithsonian](https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/astrophysics-reveal-remarkable-simulations-early-universe-dark-ages-through-first), 24 March 2022, <<https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/astrophysics-reveal-remarkable-simulations-early-universe-dark-ages-through-first>> 5 February 2024.

² Adapt. Michael Toy, “Incomprehension,” 11 February 2024, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/incomprehension-last-sunday-in-epiphany-b-february-11-2024/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/incomprehension-last-sunday-in-epiphany-b-february-11-2024/>> 2 February 2024. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. “Prayer for Illumination,” [Source Book of Worship Resources, Volume 2](#), (Canton OH, Communication Resources, 1996).