

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 14, 2021 – LAST EPIPHANY (YR. B)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Down from the Mountain ... to the Way of the Cross*”

2 Kings 2:1–12 (God grants Elisha the prophetic spirit of his mentor, Elijah)
Psalm 50:1–6 (The Lord, our righteous judge, will reveal Himself in glory)
2 Corinthians 4:3–6 (Unbelievers fail to see the Light of Christ in their darkness)
St. Mark 9:2–9 (Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop)

Have you ever had one of those moments when you look at someone you’ve known for years, and suddenly, you see them in a completely different light? In that unexpected epiphany, it’s as though you’re seeing them for the first time. And although the intensity of that insight may only last a moment, you’ll never be able to see them quite the same way again. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus’ friends had just such an experience.

This is our last Sunday together before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, and every year on this Sunday we hear again the story of the Transfiguration of Christ. In the weeks since Christmas, if you’ve been watching our online services, you’ve heard a series of stories about Jesus in which things happened that gave people sudden insights into who Jesus really was. We call such events ‘epiphanies,’ meaning they are revelations or manifestations of God’s presence in Christ.

We began with the Magi from the East kneeling before His crèche and recognizing that in Jesus they were seeing far more than just another cute baby. We then recalled the story of Jesus’ baptism by John, and how the voice of God audibly declared Jesus to be God’s beloved son as the Holy Spirit visibly alighted on Him. There were also several stories in which Jesus taught the crowds and healed the sick, and people responded with amazement, realizing that He was different than anyone they had encountered before. But today’s story is the pinnacle of the epiphany stories. Here, the veil of Heaven is pulled back and Christ is revealed in His divine glory, as the One by whom earth and heaven are held together, and in whom they are united.

Although normally we celebrate Transfiguration Sunday in August, it is highly significant that the Lectionary leads us to this story today, to conclude the season of Epiphany. But first, a bit of background. Some biblical scholars argue that this Gospel lesson is a misplaced resurrection story. They say that if you study it closely you will see that it fits the patterns associated with resurrection stories, so it probably originated as one, but it got put in the wrong place by Mark. And Matthew and Luke just followed Mark. Well, it may be true that it fits the pattern, but that’s not surprising, because the stories of Christ’s resurrection appearances are also epiphanies. And while it is likely the case that Matthew and Luke wrote their accounts of Jesus’ life by editing and adding to Mark’s, the most notable feature of this story is that it is one of the very few that appears in exactly the same place in three of the four Gospels.

The Transfiguration of Christ is the centerpiece of a long progression of stories and ideas told in the same way, in the same order, by Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So we need to look at this progression, in order to better understand this story, not only as it relates to the overall Gospel, but as it relates to the way we live out the Good News in our own lives.

The progression begins back in Mark, chapter 8, when Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And after they report that some think He’s the reincarnation of John the Baptist or the Prophet Elijah, Jesus asks who they think He is. This is when Simon Peter comes up with the Big Answer: “You are the Messiah, God’s anointed One.”

Jesus accepts his answer, but immediately begins a conversation in which it quickly becomes apparent that He and Peter have very different ideas of what it means to be God’s anointed One. Jesus is talking about the inevitability of His suffering and death in Jerusalem.

And when Peter protests against this, Jesus condemns his thinking as Satanic! After this is when Jesus tells His followers that they if they want to follow Him, they must take up their cross and be prepared to die for their faith.

It's immediately after this solemn conversation that all three gospels tell of Jesus taking Peter, James, and John up the mountain, where they witness His Transfiguration. There, they have this awesome vision of Jesus dressed in dazzling white, talking with the Old Testament prophets, Moses and Elijah. Having just been told of His certain humiliation and death, they see in Jesus the fullness of God's glory revealed.

If we take the Transfiguration story away from that backdrop, we will probably fall into the same misunderstanding that Peter did. But we can get equally tangled up if we read it without reference to what flows from it, as well. Once again, all three gospels continue the story the same way. The men all come back down the mountain and immediately find the other disciples trying unsuccessfully to heal a tormented boy. Whether the evil spirit was an illness or some kind of demonic being doesn't matter. Peter, James, and John, who had wanted to build huts on the mountain in order to cling to that glorious epiphany, are taken back down from the clouds into a broken and tormented world that's right in their faces.

Jesus heals the boy, and when His disciples ask why they couldn't do it, Our Lord speaks of the need for prayer—and some translations add, “fasting”—when confronting evil. He then tries to explain to them again that His suffering and death are surely coming, but after Peter's earlier blunder, no one dares to argue with Jesus.

At the same time, we are told they still did not understand that Jesus would have to suffer and die. And, as if to underline their failure to comprehend, all three evangelists tell us, straight after this, the disciples started arguing with one another about which of them was the greatest! We can imagine Jesus shaking His head in exasperation, as He sits them down and reminds them, “Those who want to be first must place themselves last of all, and be the servant of all.”

So, all three gospel writers are at great pains to make sure we know there is no way to the glory of the Transfiguration without accepting the way of the Cross—that we can't hang onto the ecstasy of sublime revelation in the presence of God without being sent back into a broken and tormented world, to confront evil and become servants of one another.

Some churches preach about unconditionally victorious living and endless experiences of glory, one magic moment after another, but you won't find that theology in the story of the Transfiguration unless you wrench it out context and try to read it some other way than how Matthew, Mark and Luke would have us read it. We re-enact this story in our worship every week. At the start of Mass, when we bow in reverence before the cross, we demonstrate that if the veil of heaven were pulled back, we would see Jesus as clear as day, shining in our midst.

At the same time, our worship takes place under the shadow of the Cross, for we know that the way of Christ which we are called to follow is the way of humility and suffering. This is why the Church offers us Ash Wednesday, the Season of Lent, and particularly Fridays when we pray the Stations of the Cross—that we might walk that same path with Jesus, after He came down from the mountaintop.

Today, after six weeks of epiphanies—of reliving those stories where it was revealed to us that Jesus isn't just some cool dude, but that the fullness of God dwells in Him in an unprecedented way—we are now given a glimpse of Heaven from the top of the mountain, then sent back down to walk the hard road of Lent.

Forty days in the wilderness. Forty days to examine and discipline ourselves for the work Christ has called us to do, and the way He calls us to live. Forty days to ask ourselves once more, whether we are willing to pay the price of following this Jesus ... or whether we are just looking for a blissed-out-mountaintop-religion. Forty days to fast and pray, and walk the Way of the Cross, the only road that has ever led to resurrection life.* May God grant us grace to practice a holy Lent, and eyes to see that Jesus walks that path with us. *Amen.*

* Adapt., Nathan Nettleton, "Transfiguration People," 22 February 2009, [Laughingbird.net](http://www.laughingbird.net/ComingWeeks.html) <<http://www.laughingbird.net/ComingWeeks.html>> 14 February 2015.