

## Last Epiphany B – 2012

February 19, 2012

St. Andrew's

2 Kings 2.1-12

Ps 50.1-6

2 Corinthians 4.3-6

Mark 9.2-9

We get to sing two of my favorite songs today and neither of them can be found in the hymnal. (What a surprise!) We'll sing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" during communion because it is inspired by the Elijah story of being swept up into heaven; and "Shine Jesus Shine" as our closing song directly relating to the gospel reading of Jesus' transfiguration with his shining clothes and appearance. The songs feel very different in mood and tone and temperament but they have something in common besides these lessons this morning. They represent biblical events for which we really have no understanding. ☺ As scholar Daniel Harrington puts it, "The stor[ies] certainly [have] many 'supernatural' features that are beyond the capacity of the historian."<sup>1</sup> That's putting it pretty mildly.

What are we to make of parting the waters of the Jordan River, a chariot of fire that swoops down and back up to heaven, Jesus on a mountaintop with Moses and Elijah (appearing this time without his chariot), and a heavenly voice? Sharron Blezard says: Sometimes scripture can seem so different from our own realities that we can only rely on Hollywood to give us some vision regardless of how distorted that might be, or we find that we can relate more easily to football or movie superstars than to Jesus and his entourage of disciples.<sup>2</sup>

These readings push the limits of our imaginations and sense of possibility. Must we make a choice on how to interpret them? Believe them literally in all aspects? Try to find some way to physically and physiologically explain them so that they make scientific sense? Dismiss them entirely as wild figments of someone's imagination or an author's need to connect some scriptural dots? Bruce Epperly wonders if they are "the poetics of [an] ancient world view, whose testimony is untrustworthy to postmodern people."<sup>3</sup>

Or might they represent deeper dimensions of reality? Can we permit them to point to the presence of "thin places" of transformation and resurrection that emerge in both extraordinary and ordinary moments? Apparently the Pew Center has reported that 50% of mainstream Christians have had experiences which are characteristic of mystical encounters. It doesn't have to be Jesus coming down out of the clouds to call you; it may have been a near death experience, encounters with deceased loved ones, what appears to be miraculous recovery from illness or protection in situations of grave danger.<sup>4</sup> Epperly continues that these stories of Elijah's ascension and Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Mark*, The Liturgical Press, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Sharron R. Blezard, "A Glimpse of God-Light," <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org>, Lectionary Reflection for Transfiguration of our Lord, February 19, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce G. Epperly, "Transfiguration Sunday," <http://processandfaith.org>, February 19, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* Several times!

transfiguration deserve little or no attention if we perceive them merely as ancient fairy tales or metaphorical fantasy. They will be unable to transform our lives unless we can recognize that they point to dramatic experiences of God's transforming and transfiguring presence.

If these experiences are transcendent, that is, they can overcome our physical existence and experience, then they can help us lift the veil between heaven and earth and see both ways; not only to close the space with the divine, but also to see the world as it is and to see us as we are: spiritually charged, enlivened, an ongoing part of creation.

More than twenty years ago author Madeleine L'Engle wrote of myth and mystery with respect to these two readings and how the stories can move us beyond fact into myth. Instead of defining myth as an invented story or false belief, she says that myth is a way for us to see beyond limited fact into the wonder of God's story. The stories need not be understood in the language of provable fact. In order to claim these stories which show us the nature of God, and the coming glory of Jesus, we must release the language of literalism, L'Engle wrote, and find our ease and even our gratitude, in mystery.

For some, "mystery" is nothing more than an excuse for something which cannot be proven or statistically documented. But I must say that the older I get, the more relieved and comfortable and grateful I am that I don't have to understand and quantify everything about God. I am thankful that God is beyond my understanding and vocabulary. A definable, measureable, predictable and safe God wouldn't be much worth worshipping.

Because this is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany and on Wednesday we will turn with Jesus directly toward the cross, we're given one final epiphany, or revelation, of the nature of Jesus and his coming glory. If there were any doubt that he was the Son of God, the heavenly voice dismissed that.

Much of what is read from the Bible on Sundays can be called inspirational. That is, we are inspired to become more like the people God created us to be; we are inspired to reach out to those in need with compassion; we are inspired to respond to the holiness in all of creation by how we use our resources; we are inspired to deepen our prayer lives to come closer to God.

Author Anne Lamott says there are three kinds of prayer: Help me help me help me, thank you thank you thank you, and Wow. I'm sure we can root around the story of Elijah and the chariot and Jesus on the mountain with his disciples and be inspired to amend our lives in accord with God's desires for us as we travel down off the mountain and head toward Jerusalem and Golgotha, but what a relief to be able to just say, "Wow." It can make us bow our heads, raise our hands, or bend our knees.

The disciples didn't know how to respond either, but rather than being content with "wow," they tried to capture the moment by building something concrete and reducing the stunning power of God to a Kodak moment.

It's hard to blame them. Just a few verses earlier Jesus had told them for the first time that he would undergo great suffering and be put to death. We can't blame the disciples for not wanting

to grasp that part. They “want to have the glory they can see without the message that they must hear.”<sup>5</sup> But the two cannot be separated.

Beverly Gaventa writes that the message of transfiguration in Mark’s gospel is that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing, subject of dazzling glory and “wow,” *and* the Son of Man who will be betrayed and crucified.<sup>6</sup> The disciples are overwhelmed and speechless and understandably want to hang onto this transcendent and transfiguring experience, but their path leads back into the valley where there will be violence but there will also be glory.

Transfiguring experiences are surely all around us for those who have eyes to see and ears to listen and hear; in the ordinary and common as well as the mythic or surprising. A bit of bread, a sip of wine, a wordless experience of the holy, a moment of unexpected grace, an unexplainable conviction that you have seen God. Even in chaos, disappointment, betrayal and emptiness there is an invitation to a new future; glory is on the horizon. Expect transfiguration; be awake to moments of grace; look for heaven; embrace the mystery; let light shine out of darkness.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote: *Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries. Wow.*

Gail Wheatley+

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<sup>5</sup> Beverly R. Gaventa, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*