

2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6
Mark 9:2-9

Last Epiphany B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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The Rev. Karen Haig

Letting God Come Close

When was your last crystal-clear vision of God? It seems that Peter, James and John have just one of those most unlikely, certain sightings. Having left everyone and everything behind, they climbed with Jesus to the top of a Holy Mountain and had one of those experiences that changes everything – not just for them, but for us too. Here on this final Sunday of Epiphany, we are graced with a glimpse of God’s glory. WE are offered one last epiphany.

Lent comes quickly this year. Christmas seems not so very long ago and yet here we are, just days away from Ash Wednesday. We’ve had time for only a few reports of Jesus’ ministry, remember? We heard those beautiful words God spoke to Jesus at his baptism, words God speaks to us too. You are my son, my beloved. In you I am well pleased. We heard Jesus call the fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James and John. We watched as Jesus commanded an unclean spirit to come out of a man and raised Simon’s mother-in-law from her illness. But that’s it. Today’s story seems a strange interruption as we jump 8 chapters to this awesome mountaintop event, but it brings us to an important turning point in our journey together. As today’s story unfolds, Jesus and his disciples are making the twenty-five mile trek from Galilee north to Caesarea Philippi.

Long walks make for rich conversations between good friends, and as they traveled along, Jesus asked the disciples “Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?” Of course Peter was the one to answer, and when he did, he said “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But instead of leaping for joy because Peter had finally gotten things right, Jesus responded in a most sobering way. He told his friends he was going to suffer greatly at human hands, that he would be rejected by his own people, that he would be killed, and three days later, raised from the dead.

It isn’t what they thought would happen. It certainly wasn’t the response Peter expected when he proclaimed Jesus as Messiah. But it’s the response they got. As it turns out, the cost of being a disciple of THIS Messiah was great. As it turns out, the cost was to take up their own crosses and follow in Jesus’ footsteps. Taking up crosses, dying and rising, things didn’t sound good. They’d had this information for a week or so and they were trying to go along as they always had, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But it had. And as they were trying to make sense of it all, Jesus called Peter, James and John together for another long walk, this time up the mountain. And one thing we can be sure of, whenever scripture tells us somebody’s going “up the mountain,” God will somehow be revealed.

That's not just true in the Bible. I've hiked mountains in the Holy Land and mountains in the holy land of the Pacific Northwest too, and in those glorious places God is often revealed. Some climbs are straightforward... up, and down. But others are more circuitous, and while there may be long winding stretches of trail that make clear the way forward, there are also the places where it feels like a labyrinth, with switchbacks and direction changes so that the only thing to do is put one foot in front of the other, trusting that the trail will lead us to our destination. Sometimes, we can't tell. Sometimes it isn't until we reach the very top that we have a moment of revelation, when we could see where we'd come from, and we could see where we were going. That's precisely what happened to the disciples when they went up that holy mountain with Jesus.

It's a very hard story to imagine, this story of Jesus' transfiguration. In the blink of an eye, Jesus was completely and totally transformed, his appearance changed from friend, teacher, companion on the way, to something utterly unexplainable - divine and dazzling light. I am pretty sure all that dazzling light blurred the boundaries between human and divine, pretty sure the disciples saw something they never could have imagined. Jesus fully human. Jesus fully divine. And as if that weren't enough, Elijah and Moses appeared too.

Surely it was terrifying. But it had to have been compelling too. So, having no idea what to do yet wishing they could live forever in that amazing light, Peter offered to build three dwellings, one for Elijah, one for Moses and one for Jesus... where presumably Peter, James and John would stay too. I imagine he thought that the story might unfold differently, that maybe all the talk of crosses and suffering and death would go away if they could all just stay there in the dazzling light on the top of that mountain.

But Peter couldn't change the story, and neither can we. When the voice of the living God interrupted his musings, Peter and his friends were terrified. *This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him.* These were the words Jesus alone heard at his baptism in the Jordan, but this time the words were for everyone. *Listen to him.* Listen to him. It's all the counsel they got, but it was all the counsel they needed. It's all the counsel we need too.

Walking down the mountain, the disciples must have felt stunned. They didn't want the moment to end - Peter's response on the mountain top made that so clear... "wait, don't go, I'll build dwellings for all of you, please don't leave." Yet in the blink of an eye, it was over. That's just how life is, isn't it?

There are moments we want to hold on to forever, and we can't. People die. Jobs end. We lose our health, our independence or maybe just our self-confidence. That's part of what it means to be human. Dying and rising, dying and rising, dying and rising. And still, it's natural to want to cling to the glorious times, the gentle times, the easy times, the times when God feels close.

That's what was going on, on that mountaintop you know. God came so close, and when that happened, the disciples had one of those experiences that changes everything – not just for them, but for us too. Here on this final Sunday of Epiphany, before we depart the season of brightness and light for the penitential shadows of Lent, we are graced with a glimpse of God's glory, offered one last magnificent epiphany, so we can remember that God breaks through in the midst of life's hard parts. In those times when we feel like everything's coming apart, God gives us a glimpse of glory so that we have what we need to get through.

God's glory comes in so many forms - in a small kindness from a stranger, in the opportunity to use our gifts and give what we have, in children's laughter, cups of tea, in friends, or a walk in the woods or some other simple recognition of God's love and faithfulness. Like the disciples, we live with uncertainty, but the God who loves us is always certain.

Not long after they came down from the mountain, Jesus told them again that he would suffer, that he would die, and that he would rise again. As it turns out, the glorious light of resurrection is inseparable from the way of the cross. This last Sunday in Epiphany is a turning point, in the Gospel and in our lives.

As we look forward to our Lenten journey together, I pray that we will accept the invitation to consider the things that keep God at a distance, and to ponder how we might move those things aside so that God can come dazzlingly close. There is a cross in our story, yes, but in the end, our story is about resurrection. We don't need to be afraid to look inside, because there is dazzling light in us too. We only need to open our hearts to one another and to the God who loves us not because of who we are or what we do or how well we do it, but because love is who God is and there is simply nothing else God could do. Amen.