

Exodus 34:29-35
Psalm 99
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Luke 9:28-36

Last Epiphany C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
March 3, 2019
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Glimpses of Glory

On the first Sunday of the church year, when the children come back to Godly Play, when the program year starts at church, when school starts up again and we find ourselves settling in to a rhythm that is most welcome after the too long and busy days of summer... on that first Sunday, our children hear the Godly Play story of the Circle of the Church Year. We use this beautiful circle to help the children understand that God's time goes in a circle, not a line, that it goes on forever, and that it gives us everything we need.



We begin in Advent, the time to get ready for the mystery of Christmas. Getting ready for that mystery takes time, so we have four long luxurious weeks. And then comes Christmas, which isn't just one day because one day wouldn't be nearly enough to celebrate the mystery of God come among us as the incarnate one. We have 12 days to celebrate Christmas, and some of us really do that. And then comes the Epiphany, the day the wise ones made their way to the place of Jesus' birth, the day it became clear that Jesus came to be God among us for absolutely everyone, the day we began to understand that the light Jesus brought in to the world was a light so bright, so dazzling that it was strong enough light up the whole world. In Epiphany we remember that we too carry the light of Christ and we wonder about how we might shine our light out into the world to give light to the dark places in ourselves, in our families, in our communities, in our world. We've come to the end of Epiphany, the season that always ends with Transfiguration Sunday – that's today.

Transfiguration Sunday is a really big day if you are one who pays attention to the church year. It prepares us to move into a new season when we'll have the time we need to grow, to rest, to discover, to explore, to reflect, to come fully alive in God. We've spent all these weeks in Epiphany and had a goodly amount of time to discover what it means to be the bearers of the Christ light in the world. And that season comes to an end today on Transfiguration Sunday. This is the day that marks the end of one season and a turn to another, the season of Lent. And the stories we hear today – stories of mountaintop experiences, of stunning revelations of God, of shock and surprise and awe – these stories help us to transition to the places we will go together in Lent.

I love Lent. That surprises lots of people, I think because people have ideas about Lent that really aren't helpful. Lent is not a time to criticize and critique, to measure our deficits and notice how inadequate we are to the task of being the hands and feet and face of Christ in the world. Rather, Lent is the time to

go deeper into our lives in God, the time to notice what we do to keep God at a distance, the time to wonder what riches God desires for us and how we might come closer to them.

So here we are – the place where we turn from letting our lights shine to going deep inside ourselves and our relationships with God. And what we're offered for our passage is the story of the Transfiguration. I love the Transfiguration story. And it confounds me. I love the story because in it we see a glimpse of the very human Jesus fully divine in all God's glory. I love the story because I can find myself in it too. Like the disciples, I can become exhausted in the face of difficult news. Like the disciples, I want to stay in the presence of God once I've gotten myself there. Like the disciples, I am sometimes afraid of the dark clouds that seem to cover over my life, or the lives of the ones I love. And like the disciples, I sometimes just don't understand what God is up to.

What is going on in this story? There are a few words that begin today's gospel passage that we didn't get to hear. The passage actually begins "Now about 8 days after these sayings, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray." I guess we leave out that part about the 8 days after the sayings because we didn't get to hear what those sayings were. But they are important. The words Luke is referring to are the words Jesus spoke the first time he told his disciples he knew he was going to die at the hands of the Romans who so desperately wanted rid of him. As it turns out, this trip up the mountain comes at a very precious and precarious time. By now, Jesus had been ministering, teaching, traveling and living with the disciples for a long time. He had preached a whole new world, a world where all were beloved and blessed, where all had enough and no one had so much that it ruined them, where justice and peace and mercy and love ruled over all. Long before this day, when Jesus called his disciples, they were fairly unremarkable people - fishermen, a tax collector, a carpenter, a thief. But after all this time with Jesus, their lives had been radically changed. Being with Jesus had infused them with a kind of hope and belief in a way of life that none of them ever could have conceived of before meeting Jesus. A better life where all are cared for, where the sick and the poor and the blind and the lame and the possessed were healed and fed and utterly changed.

They had all been swept up in God's story and God's story had become their story. Everything centered around Jesus, the one Peter proclaimed as the Messiah, the Holy One of God. They had finally figured it out, finally understood who Jesus really was, and as soon as they recognized him, everything began to crumble. When Peter spoke the words: You are the Messiah of God, Jesus responded by telling them he was about to undergo great suffering and be killed in the most horrific way possible. Oh, he told them of his resurrection and ascension too, but I can't help thinking that all they heard was that he was going to die.

And so that's what was in the minds and hearts of Peter, James and John when they went with Jesus up the mountain to pray. Their worlds were falling apart, and so they prayed. It was a good idea. Praying together draws us closer to the ones we pray with and the ones we pray for. And I'm guessing that's exactly what they all wanted. To draw nearer to God and to each other. Everything they had worked for and hoped for and lived for was coming crashing down around them. We know there is resurrection at the end of the story, but the disciples didn't know that. They didn't see everything with the resurrection happy ending in mind. Their beloved teacher, their master, their Messiah had just told them he would be killed. There was nothing to do but pray.

So pray they did, and when they had prayed so long and so hard that they were weary beyond belief, something very strange and wonderful happened... Jesus began to glow with a radiance so bright that they could hardly see him. And in that radiance they saw Moses the keeper of the Law and Elijah the prophet there with Jesus. It must have been stunning, that light so bright that they couldn't see the difference between human and divine. It had to have been terrifying too. Nobody knew what to think or to do and because he was who he was, Peter jumped in anyway offering to build three dwellings so they could stay forever.

I'm guessing they thought things might be different, that the talk of death and suffering and the end of everything they had hoped for would disappear if they could just stay there on top of that mountain bathed in that glorious light. But Peter couldn't make that happen and neither can we. Even as he tried, they were covered in clouds and terrified as voice of God came booming out This is my Son, my beloved. Listen to him. Those are almost exactly the words Jesus heard at his baptism, only then God was speaking only to Jesus, saying YOU are my Son the beloved. There on that mountaintop, the words were for everyone. Listen to him. Listen to him. In the face of Jesus' certain death, that was all the counsel they got. As it turns out, it was all the counsel they needed. It's all the counsel we need too.

I can't imagine what Jesus and his friends felt like walking down the mountain. I'm pretty sure 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 houses for all of you, please don't leave." But in the blink of an eye, it was over. Life can be like that, I know. 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... 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 quiet thoughtfulness of Lent, we are given a glimpse of God's glory so we can remember that God breaks through in the midst of everything, whether blissful or devastating. When we feel like everything's coming undone, God gives us a glimpse of glory so that we have what we need to get through.

Transfiguration Sunday is not one of the typical days the church sets apart for Baptisms. But as it turns out, it's the perfect day. Today we welcome precious baby Luke into the household of God. Today Luke will be for us the dazzling light of Christ. And when that happens, when we welcome Luke and his big brother Thomas and Clare and Charles into this community in this extraordinary way, our community will be transfigured and transformed, changed from glory in to glory, changed forever because they have come among us. I thank our God for that. Amen.