

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 2
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration A
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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Deacon Dan has been back with us recently. While it's true he's retired, and we need to let him be retired, but he'll be with us from time to time and that is a great joy. Dan recently returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and he's been recounting some of his experiences to me. Those conversations are taking me back to my own Holy Land pilgrimage three years ago. I remember some things quite vividly - like the very early hours of our last morning on the Sea of Galilee. I'd set off to attend mass at the Franciscan church down the road – the church built in the place thought to have been where Jesus fed the multitudes. As I walked along, the only sounds I heard were gentle, lapping waves and early morning birdsong. The path went along the sea shore for a while, then turned up and meandered through an olive grove. This is where Jesus walked, I reminded myself. This was his landscape.

The evening before, we had been briefed on the day to come. Attend early morning mass if you'd like to, have bags packed and out of the rooms by 7:30, eat breakfast and be at the bus by 8. "We are leaving this tranquil place," our guide had told us. "Everything is about to change. Tomorrow we go through the checkpoints and into occupied Palestine." All I could think of was Jesus turning his eyes toward Jerusalem. It's quite something to decide to enter a terrible, even terrifying situation with eyes wide open.

Despite the tranquility of the gentle lapping waves and morning birdsong, I was filled with a strong and strange sense of foreboding as I walked along that path near the Galilean seashore. We hadn't even left that peaceful seaside village, and already I was fixed on what was to come. There, walking in the place Jesus and his friends had walked, I felt the very real shift the disciples must have felt when Jesus told them that life as they knew it was over because he was soon to suffer at the hands of humans, and that he would die and rise again. We know these stories through the lens of resurrection, we know there's a "happy ending" to it all. But the disciples didn't know that. They didn't have any idea of the power or the meaning or the joy of God's ultimate victory in Jesus' resurrection. They only knew that things were about to take a turn for the worse, and I imagine they too had that same strong and strange sense of foreboding. But I'm jumping ahead.

Here's where we are in the story... Jesus and his disciples are making the long trek from Galilee north to Caesarea Philippi. Long walks make for rich conversations between friends, and as they traveled along, Jesus asked the disciples "*Who do people say that I am, who do you say that I am?*" And when

Peter answered *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”*¹ instead of leaping for joy, Jesus told them he was going to suffer greatly at human hands, that he would be rejected by his own people, killed, and three days later be raised from the dead.

This was not 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 to this Messiah was great. As it turns out, the cost of being a disciple 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. It was crazy. And as they were trying to make sense of it all, Jesus called Peter, James and John together to take another long walk, this time up the mountain. And one thing we can be sure of, whenever anybody goes UP THE MOUNTAIN, God will somehow be revealed.

I climbed many mountains in the Holy Land. Sometimes the paths were straightforward. But sometimes, climbing toward the top, there were long, winding stretches where it felt like a labyrinth with switchbacks and direction changes, where the only thing to do was to put one foot in front of the other, trusting that the trail would ultimately take us where we wanted to go. Sometimes, we couldn't tell. And sometimes, when we reached the very top, we had a moment of revelation. We could see where we'd come from, and we could see where we were going. And that's what happened to the disciples when they went up the mountain with Jesus.

Imagine it – there they were, at the top of the mountain, far away from everyone. And then it happened! The great epiphany! Jesus was transfigured and the change was so profound that even his clothes begin to glow dazzling white! He was transfigured. Transformed. Utterly and completely changed before their very eyes. And gazing at their very human friend and teacher Jesus, the disciples were suddenly dazzled by the glory of his very real divinity. And as if a stunningly glowing Jesus weren't enough, Elijah and Moses appear too!

Well, at that point, Peter was beside himself... he was at the top of the mountain with Moses, the faithful man of God who brought the Law down from Mt. Sinai, the one who led the Israelites through the wilderness, the one who walked them right up to the Promised Land. And Elijah, the mighty prophet who raised the dead, brought fire down from the sky, and was taken up into heaven in a mighty whirlwind.

The disciples saw where they'd come from in Moses and Elijah. And there, between those two holy men of God, stood the transfigured Jesus, the Messiah fully revealed. That was the new world they

¹ *Matthew 16:13,15-16*

were entering in to. I don't think Jesus became divine in the transfiguration so much as I think his true nature – God from God, Light from Light - was revealed. And that revelation changed everything for the disciples.

Having no idea what to do but wishing they could live forever in this amazing light, Peter offered to build three dwellings. I imagine he thought 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. So 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.*² These were the words Jesus alone heard at his baptism in the Jordan when God said *YOU are my Son, my beloved.*³ But this time the words were for everyone. Listen to him. Listen to him. It's all the counsel they got, but it's all the counsel they needed. For those disciples and for us, the command to listen to Jesus didn't only mean hearing his words. It meant obedience, which is stunning, if you think about it. How often do we crack open our bibles and listen to the living, lifegiving Word of God? Every day? Once a week? On the Sundays we're in church? We'll have a hard time finding our way to obedience if we aren't listening for God's Word...

Walking down the mountain, the disciples must have been in a bit of a shock. 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 mountain top. 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 the hard parts. In those times when we feel like everything's coming apart, God gives us a glimpse of glory so that we find what we need to get through. God's glory comes in so many forms - in the small kindness of a complete stranger, in the opportunity to use our gifts and give what we have, in children's laughter, in 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 God's love is certain.

² Matthew 17:5

³ Matthew 3:17

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, in Jesus' life and in our own.

This last Sunday in Epiphany is a turning point in the Gospel and it can be a turning point in our lives, if we let it. As we look forward to our Lenten journey, I pray we will accept the invitation to discover the things that keep God at a distance and to move those things aside so God can come dazzlingly close.
Amen