

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

Last Epiphany C
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It Happened When He Prayed

Every year on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, we hear this story. It's a bridge story, one that takes us from the light-filled season of Epiphany into the holy darkness of the season of Lent, when we'll have 40 long days and nights to grow, to rest, to discover, to explore, to reflect, to pray, to set things down and to take things up. These stories we hear today – stories of prayer, of mountaintop experiences, of stunning revelations of God, of shock and surprise and awe will help prepare us for such things.

I love Lent. This surprises a lot of people, I think because people have ideas about Lent that really aren't helpful. Some people see Lent as a time for enforced self-improvement, a time for self-criticism, a time to measure our deficits and notice how inadequate we are at being the hands and feet and face of Christ in the world. Some people see Lent as a time to wage war on sinful desires by denying themselves things like chocolate or coffee or social media. And while spending more time in prayer than on screens, or doing more to change the world around us, or embarking on a journey of self-discovery that includes making changes that enrich our lives are all good ideas, they need to be done with open minds and loving hearts, with a God's eye view of ourselves, and always, always steeped in prayer. Lent is the time to deepen 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 Epiphany and letting our lights shine, to going deep inside ourselves and exploring our relationships with God. And the bridge for our passage is the story of the transfiguration. Let's get ourselves situated. Eight days earlier, Peter had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus responded by telling the disciples he would suffer, be killed, and three days later be raised from the dead. And then he swore them to secrecy. It wasn't the response they were expecting after finally figuring out who Jesus really was, and I imagine they felt isolated, confused and more than a bit frightened. It must have been a lot to hold, and I imagine they were grateful to have Jesus to themselves, and to be heading up the mountain to pray. Finding a quiet place to sit with Jesus and pray is one of the few things that calms me when I'm feeling isolated, confused, or frightened. However, usually when I sit down with Jesus to pray, he doesn't light up, and mostly we don't have visitors...

The Transfiguration story 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, and because I can see myself in it. Like the

disciples, I can become exhausted in the face of terrible 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.

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 were the law. When Jesus first called his disciples, they were fairly unremarkable people - a tax collector, a builder, a thief and some fishermen. But after all their time with Jesus, their lives had been radically changed, infused with a kind of hope and belief in a way of life that none of them ever before could have conceived of. A better life where all were cared for, and the sick, poor, blind, possessed, and lame people were healed and fed and completely transformed.

The disciples had been swept up in God's story and God's story had become their story. Everything centered around Jesus, the one Peter recognized 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, their worlds 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 their minds and hearts when they went with Jesus up the mountain to pray. Their worlds were falling apart, and so they prayed. It was a good idea. 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, or Moses and Elijah who were there with him. It must have been stunning - it was a light so bright they couldn't see the difference between human and divine. I think it must have been terrifying too. Nobody knew what to think or to do, so Peter, being Peter, offered to build three dwellings so they could stay forever.

I'm guessing they thought things might be different, that all the talk of death and suffering and the end of everything they had hoped for would disappear if only they could stay there, basking in that glorious light. But it wasn't to be. Suddenly they were covered in clouds and terrified by God's voice thundering out of the clouds saying *This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him.*

Those are very similar to the words Jesus heard at his baptism, at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. *You are my Son, my beloved.* There is a difference there – can you hear it? God is speaking to Jesus at his baptism, saying you are my Son. But here, at this very different sort of beginning, the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross, we hear similar words, but this time the words were for everyone. *This is my Son, my chosen one. 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.

When Jesus and the disciples went up the mountain to pray, they were listening for God. That's a lot of what prayer is, you know, listening for God. And Jesus was transfigured, his entire countenance changed, while he was praying. Luke's is the only gospel writer who sets the transfiguration in the context of prayer, and I can't stop thinking about that. Jesus was transfigured when he prayed. And I wonder, are we?

Why do you pray? After all, God doesn't need us to say what's on our minds and hearts, God already knows, right? Yes, I believe that's right, but something wonderful happens when we pray, no matter how well or unwell we think we've done it. Praying draws us closer to God and closer to the ones we pray with and for. I think we're changed by prayer, that we're formed by our prayer. This is particularly true for Episcopalians – we are people joined together in Common Prayer. I think the disciples were joined together in their prayer, too, and I think I understand the deep desire to remain in that place so set apart from the frightening future they were all walking into.

I can't imagine what Jesus and his friends felt like walking down the mountain. We're told they were silent. They hadn't wanted to come back down the mountain, back to the world of an occupying army, disputes among religious leaders, and a Messiah who was about to die. Yes, the mountaintop moment had happened, 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. Relationships end. We lose our job, our health, our independence or maybe just our self-confidence. That's part of what it is 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 quiet, holy darkness of Lent, we get a glimpse of God's glory to remind us 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, making sure we have what we need to get through.

Whatever our journey through Lent brings – whether glorious mountaintop experiences or forty days of slogging through the valleys, we will have everything we need. Because all we need is Jesus, who promises to be with us every step of the way. Amen.