

## Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A: 6 March 2011

Today brings to a close the season of the Sundays after the Feast of the Epiphany, which began January 6; it was a long season this year, the full possible nine weeks. Still, whatever its length, Epiphany is a season of powerful import for the Church. You may recall that the Greek word from which “epiphany” comes means “showing,” or “manifestation.” Throughout this season we have been reading about, singing about, praying about, proclaiming “Christ our light,” the one who shows us, who makes manifest, how we were truly created to be and who calls us to assume the fullness of his nature—which is our nature as sons and daughters of God.

The season began with the baptism of Christ, as God bestowed upon Jesus his identity and his mission: This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. The framers of the lectionary have chosen to close the season with a wonderful parenthesis that lets us hear that proclamation again, but in a very different context.

I don't know about you, but today's gospel selection is one of those that always make me feel like I've walked into the room in the middle of an ongoing conversation: "Six days later...." Six days after *what?* What just happened? And how important was it to what comes next? Doesn't this sort of thing make you crazy!

Luckily, unlike conversations, the printed word allows us to go back and read up on the subject at hand. So let me give you a brief summary of the situation thus far: For nearly two years, according to the Matthean account, Jesus and his disciples have been on the road, teaching, healing, performing miracles, and generally facing down all opposition from those who disapprove. Suddenly—and this is all in the 15 verses immediately preceding today's passage—things change: Jesus and the disciples are off having a little quiet time by themselves for once, when Jesus asks, "Who are people saying that I am?" You remember this. To the disciples it seems a logical question for a leader to ask: "What are people saying about me?" But after a few replies, Jesus gets to the real point: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter immediately declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God who has come to restore Israel. I can just hear Jesus, vaguely uneasy with this earnest confession of faith. "Yes, but...well, you see, it may not be quite what you think...." And then—as the evangelist pictures the scene—Jesus goes on to explain his coming death and resurrection, saying that this is all a part of God's glorious plan to establish the kingdom on earth. Finally, he declares that the way of true discipleship is steadfast loyalty to his teachings and his way of life: "If any of you truly want to be my followers, you must deny yourselves and daily lay down your lives for others; then you can follow me."

The disciples must have been dumbfounded. What Jesus had to say about the cost of discipleship presented a major challenge to their expectations of the Messiah. What could he possibly mean by saying that he must suffer and be slain? Where was the victory in that? They were confused, close to despair, on the verge of rejecting Jesus and his message.

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And with this as the background, we come to the Transfiguration: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves." This transition suggests that these two events, meaning this new understanding of Jesus and his mission and the Transfiguration, are obviously closely connected for the evangelist. Let me suggest a reason.

Remember that the New Testament writers were concerned less with historical fact than with creating a powerful narrative. Did the Transfiguration actually happen in this way... who knows? And it really doesn't matter. What matters is the author's message to his audience, his community, and—by extension—to us about how God acts. The gospel, after all, is much more metaphor than description. So let's explore the world of the metaphor for a moment.

A group of people—the disciples, the community for whom this narrative was originally written, us today—have just been given some very unpalatable news: their leader, beloved to some, a puzzle to others, a mystery, even a thorn to still others, is going to leave them. They do not truly understand and it's really hard to hear, it challenges everything they've understood until now, and their—our—apprehension is strong.

They—we—need comforting and reassurance, otherwise it would be too much to bear. Here is where we experience the gospel writer as a master craftsman at work. Like any good storyteller, he constructs his narrative around a series of moments that build on each other like successive waves, creating a mounting tension that moves toward climax. Here we are on the crest of one of those waves. Having led his listeners to the edge of rebellion, the evangelist stops the action to remind them—and us—that Jesus, who was pronounced the Son of God at his baptism, and whom the author has portrayed as embodying God's glory in his kingdom ministry of vanquishing the forces of destruction, is still effecting God's will even as he goes to the cross.

Just how does the writer effect this comforting, provide this note of reassurance? What happens up on that mountain? First, notice who make up the witnesses: Peter and John and James, the three men who will just happen to become the leaders of the newly established faith. Coincidence? I don't think so. Take heart, says the narrative; this happened to men whose reputation you know to be trustworthy—they received this revelation and have passed it on to you.

Second, notice what they do on the mountaintop: they pray. When we are troubled, the story suggests, we will find reassurance in prayer.

Third, notice how reassurance is supplied: Moses and Elijah are introduced to show that the road on which Jesus has embarked is in accord with the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). See, says the evangelist, how can you doubt? Jesus stands in relationship to the whole of salvation history as its fulfillment and its completion. And—if that's not enough—the author adds that in doing so Jesus partakes of the glory of God, seen in the shining and dazzling that envelopes him.

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Finally, notice how the evangelist seals the message: the same voice that greeted Jesus at his baptism sounds again, again commending Jesus as God's beloved son, but now with an additional thrust—the disciples (we) are commanded by God to listen to this Jesus.

What we have is a pretty complete and complex package: one moment we are challenged to accept a disturbing and seemingly contradictory teaching, and the next we are promised a glimpse of heaven itself if we only make the attempt. Hard as it is to accept, the author says, through prayer and perseverant faith you will see the heart of the mystery of salvation prepared by God in Jesus, promised by the tradition and preserved by the Church. This will sustain you through whatever may come.

When we talk of the Transfiguration, we usually mean Jesus, revealing the glory of God present in and acting through him. Yet I believe—and perhaps this is even more important for our lives—that when we speak of the Transfiguration we should mean rather what happens to the disciples, to Peter and John and James. According to the dictionary, to be transfigured is to be powerfully changed, to be radically altered. Surely these men were powerfully changed, altered for life by what happened to them that day. For a moment they were granted a glimpse of heaven on earth, and in that moment they saw, they knew, they understood that the Messiah and the God of Suffering Love were one and the same and it changed their lives forever. They would never be the same as they were before they climbed that mountain.

According to the great spiritual director Morton Kelsey, writing in his book *Transcend*, life itself is one never-ending sequence of epiphanies, “ah-ha” moments. The disclosure of God's being in our world happens at all points of life—in prayer, in the sacraments, in dreams, in art, in loving another, in meditation, in death and birth—to name a few. And no matter how varied these experiences are, Kelsey says, some common characteristics predominate. They are brief, usually lasting only a few moments. They bring a feeling of oneness with the universe, along with a new sense of insight. The experiences normally are passive--that is, one feels encountered by a Higher Power, not that one has "found" God. Lastly, each encounter contains the invitation to move on to greater spiritual growth, a deeper sense of commitment.

Poor Peter. As the evangelist portrays him, he doesn't understand this at all, not now anyway, although he will come to later. He wants to prolong this wonderful vision of a fulfilled Israel, to stay on the mountaintop forever. But the narrator says that Peter got it wrong and then shows us why. In the very next passage Jesus goes down the mountain and heals a child possessed of a demon. This great revelation of God's favor and purpose has just occurred and Jesus merely goes on about his business of feeding, teaching, healing. No “merely” about it really. This, the author wants to say, is the essence of how God's anointed acts. This is what transfiguring power is all about. The world is transfigured when Christian men and women are not seduced by the temptation to preserve a great spiritual moment as though it were set in amber, but instead leave the mountaintop and lay their hands on someone possessed by a demon, or sick, or in need. The world is transfigured when we keep a balance between such peak experiences and those that get our hands dirty in the business of living and serving.

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Most of us will never see God revealed in white light or hear the divine voice echo out of a cloud. And that's possibly a good thing. So the deeper question is, whatever experience we may have had, what will we do with it? Set it as a memento on a shelf? Enshrine it on a disc of digital photos? Or feel it as a call to something more, something bigger, something deeper that leads more fully to a life lived for God and others.

Right now the Discovery process has launched you on a period of discernment, asking questions in order to create a narrative profile of who you are to be offered to the bishop and potential candidates. I wonder whether any of you will be tempted to answer like Peter; I suspect some will, it's a natural enough human response: So for some it will be "Ooh, ooh, Monroe Bailie. Build a shrine; let us stay here and worship." For others it may be "Ooh, ooh, Dick Taylor, build a shrine." And moving closer in history, for some it will even be "Ooh, ooh, Charles Uhlik. Build a shrine."

You can tell that I think any of these moves would be a mistake. Certainly consider what are the positive qualities about any of these or other priests that you value and would like to see continued. But be careful about how you choose what you want to hold up as tradition; do it with intention and purpose. Look to the foundations you have inherited and continue to build wisely, but always with an eye more to the future than to the past. Otherwise, as Jaroslav Pelikan, the great late Yale professor of Christian history and theology has so succinctly put it, you are not following tradition, which is the living faith of the dead; you are practicing traditionalism, which is the dead faith of the living. Pelikan goes on, "Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time, so all that is needed to solve any problem is to arrive at the supposedly unanimous testimony of this homogenized tradition."

What is Christ Episcopal Church besides a nice group of people with a somewhat checkered history of survival and a big and beautiful—if also troublesome—building? Is your life together—your worship, your service in the world, your experience of faith formation—transfiguring, transformative? Or is it focused on your own comfort?

If it is indeed something more, how will you show that to the world? Do your faces shine when you leave this place? Do your neighbors, coworkers, fellow students know where you go to church and why? Is your faith the center of your identity or is it an add-on?

Shortly after I arrived last Fall, in one of my early *Caller* articles, I laid out some of the work I saw you as called to do together around discernment for the future. I spoke about the tension between the necessity of change and the desire for stability, the tension of being out of sight of shore. To those who questioned what I meant by the *necessity* of change, I offered the observation that I find it a law of life that if nothing changes, nothing changes. If there is no change, there is no growth; and where there is no growth, there is no life. There is a time for everything, and nothing stays the same forever, as the author of Ecclesiastes says so well.

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I know change is hard; I understand that transitional periods build anxiety in some to “get it over, to get on with it.” Let’s get back to what we know, what is solid, what is unchanging so we won’t feel so uncomfortable. Some of this is inevitable, yet it need not be the whole picture. There are other ways of looking at and meeting change. I have long valued these words from Andre Gide, which seem to me to speak to the situation here: “One does not discover new lands without being willing to lose sight of shore for a very long time.” I think that this is the essence of what it means to live in faith and hope. It is a good metaphor, too, for the journey on which you have embarked. And of course it is not really true that we travel without any information. We know our ultimate destination, which is God, and we carry a map in the Scriptures and a compass in the Prayer Book. Still, Gide’s quote resonates deeply; I hope you will not be tempted to turn back before you get there.

I will close with a passage from Gail Godwin’s wonderful novel, *The Finishing School*, in which Ursula, an older, elderly, woman gives this advice to the young narrator: “There are two kinds of people. One kind, you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very *nice* self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas, the other kind keep moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, ‘X stops here,’ or ‘Now I know all there is to know about Y.’ That doesn’t mean they are unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are *fluid*. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing....If you ever feel it coming, you must do something quickly.” (p. 4)

Just as I called you two weeks ago to be ripe, to be juicy, now I call you to be fluid. Choose life, that you may live, with all the messiness and disorderliness and energy and spice that may come with that choice. Don’t just replace one kind of closed community with another. I believe that what we do here/what we do together *can* have the power and potential to transform, to transfigure the world, to show it its true self as God created it, to bring to the world the love of God in Christ. So when we settle, when we set our sights on less, when we look backwards and set up little shrines to freeze the moment, I believe we miss the point and misuse our calling. God has begun a good work in you; indeed, God has been working through you for over 150 years. Trust that God, with your help, will continue to support this work to bring it to fruition. Trust that God’s handiwork is always about far more than endings: it is about fulfillment and new beginnings. To believe otherwise would mean an empty future, which in turn means a bankrupt present.

One last thing: Way back at the beginning of these Sundays after Pentecost, as we celebrated the baptism of Jesus and his acceptance of the mission given him by God, I reminded you of your own baptismal mission and I gave you pledge cards, asking you to live into that identity by actively participating in worship, in learning, in service to others, and in reconciliation. That was nine weeks ago...2 and a half months. How are you doing? Are you practicing transformation in your own life? Did you take me seriously, or did that slip end up in a drawer, or the trash, or did it even get past the recycling bin here at church?

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