

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Last Epiphany A) – March 2, 2014
Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today is the Last Sunday of what has been a lengthy and wintry Epiphany season, with Lent coming a bit later this year, beginning this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday. Our Sunday lessons during Epiphany have told stories of lives in transition, starting with the baptism and empowerment of Jesus from carpenter's son from Nazareth to the beginnings of his messianic public ministry as God's Beloved Son; to the calling of his first disciples who left all that was familiar to them when he said, "Follow me;" to the fulfillment of Simeon's hopes as he held the infant Jesus in his arms. We then had four Sundays reflecting on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which included Jesus' descriptions of the journey of discipleship as the "blessed" or "complete" life, and his disciples as the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world"; and Jesus expressing his desire for us to be congruent in our thoughts, words and deeds. And finally, on this last Sunday of the Epiphany season, we again hear the reaffirmation of Jesus' role as Messiah in his journey from the Mount of Transfiguration toward the showdown in Jerusalem. In spite of the rough winter we've had, this season has not been a time to sit down and prop up your feet! Epiphany means shine. And this Epiphany season has meant rise and shine!

Our gospel reading from Matthew of the Transfiguration of Jesus represents the epiphany, or shining forth, of the Light of the World—the hoped-for Messiah, God's Beloved—in fulfillment of all that was foretold in the Scriptures. This event takes place just prior to Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem, and it is read just before we begin the Lenten season of preparation, of *our* walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem and beyond. Just prior to this story in each of the gospel accounts, Jesus predicts his own death, and prescribes the way of the cross for his disciples as the likely consequence of following him. In order to confirm that course for himself and for his disciples, and to strengthen and encourage them, he takes his three closest disciples up the mountain. There the disciples experience Jesus as a Being of Light, and they are all put in the presence of Moses and Elijah—some pretty impressive company. These two had had similar experiences of God's presence and power on other mountaintops.ⁱⁱ Moses and Elijah not only represent God's purposes for humanity spelled out in the law and the prophets, respectively, that formed the whole of Scripture. They also come together in the very last verses of the Hebrew Scripture to point to a reunion that would occur with the coming of the Messiah of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

Now during and following Jesus' transfiguration the disciples remain in a bit of a fog. Jesus orders them to "tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Their limited understanding and presumption that Jesus had come with messianic might, and would thus sidestep a martyr's death, did not allow them to fully capture the meaning of this moment. Take Peter, for example. As if to underscore his confusion while on the mountain, Peter blurted out the proposal to construct dwellings. He doesn't get it, but wants to cling to the experience. Evidently, Peter may have thought that on that mountain of Transfiguration the great day of salvation had fully arrived, and that what Jesus had predicted to follow in Jerusalem

was simply not the right script. Peter had yet to understand that the real impact of God's glory shining from the transfigured Jesus would come only after the Messiah made an appearance on another mount, that of Golgotha, also called Calvary. In fact, only by living through what came next - the suffering, death, and raised life of Jesus - would the disciples be able to say with any real understanding what they had experienced back on that mountain. Until then, and forever thereafter, Peter, James, and John and all who join them as disciples of Jesus would do well to heed the voice from the mountain-top of Transfiguration, that said, "Listen to him!" Follow Christ where he leads you, even to places you would rather not go; look for God's glory – often hidden in plain sight - shining in all those you encounter; and know that God will be with you there.

So, that experience on the mountain was not for the sake of freezing the moment for all time, nor for a photo opportunity—capturing it as a tableau or in a scrapbook or for some sort of theological proof-text later on—but rather, it was for the disciples to appreciate the mystical experience itself, and to strengthen them for their coming down the mountain and resolutely heading toward the inevitable and costly confrontation to come. But, as T.S. Eliot put it, "We had the experience, but missed the meaning."^{iv} I'm afraid we do that a lot—in our lives, in our society and in our churches. And that was true also for the earliest witnesses themselves, as we also read today in *another* version of this Transfiguration story written sometime later and found in our reading from the second letter of Peter (1:16-21). As Peter couldn't quite understand this experience when he was in the midst of it, it seems he had as difficult a time in his reflection on it years later. To be fair to Peter, it is very unlikely that he wrote this, as this letter refers to disputes the early church was having with competing philosophies such as Epicureanism, in the early part of the second century—long after Peter's death. Nevertheless, Matthew's account and the 2 Peter text, both of which describe the Transfiguration, do so in very different ways.^v In the description of the Transfiguration in Matthew, the emphasis is on the awesome and transformative experience itself of God's power and love bathing Jesus in light, and on the affirmation of Jesus' mission of redemption for all humanity. The emphasis in the version from the Second Letter of Peter has a very different tone. Rather than being equipped with this powerful experience in itself, these later followers of Jesus were armed with a *proof text*, that is, a definitive and certain interpretation of the experience, which they use to set themselves over against – and above – others. This is a bit like the tourist who goes to see, say, the Grand Canyon. He gets off the tour bus, spends fifteen minutes "surveying" the unbelievably awesome Grand Canyon—and then spends an hour and a half in the gift shop buying postcards of the Grand Canyon to keep and to send to others with the implied message of "I saw this place, and you didn't!" or, "I was here, and this proves it."^{vi} With that in mind, listen again to the text of Second Peter:

"For we did not follow cleverly devised myths, when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty...We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain...So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this... (1:16, 18-19a)"

Theologian Heidi Hadsell, President of Hartford Seminary, comments that, “The writer of 2 Peter knows that for many of us the reality and importance of the [presence and power of God] is not so much in the experience but in the...proof which reassures us that our version [of the experience] not only exists but is definitive. The emphasis is thus not so much on the experience as it is on proving one had the experience and that it is legitimate and true.”^{vii} So ingrained is the tendency of many religious people, including many Christians, to affirm what we believe by pointing out the “mistakes” or “un-truths” or “myths” of others that we often don’t even notice it. We need to learn how to share our faith in a spirit of dialogue and to un-learn our tendency to bolster our faith claims with conscious or un-conscious negative statements and images of others’ experiences and perspectives.^{viii}

This pattern in our religious perspectives is also played out in the “culture wars” of our social and political perspectives as well.^{ix} We all know that our highly charged and quite polarized political climate leaves many people believing or saying or doing one thing precisely because the other side believes or says or does the opposite. For many that’s as good an explanation as they can give for what they believe and say and do. And it’s all played out in such black and white terms: if our perspective is right, then others’ must be wrong. In fact, those other perspectives being wrong is one of the major ways (or proofs) that we know ours is right. This is combined with the dynamic that nowadays each side is not only entitled to their own opinions, but—contrary to what Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said—each side seems entitled also to their own set of facts and their own media sources and pundits who give us those “facts.”^x

Professor Hadsell leaves us two important questions, first “Can we trust our faith enough to share it in a way that invites conversation with others rather than closing off the possibility of conversation and barricading ourselves behind the walls of our own certainty? [And secondly] Can we share our faith and values and remain open to what others have to share with us as well, in what might even become a mutual process of discovery?” These questions have serious implications for us in our pluralistic urban, national and global society with its vastly diverse contexts and perspectives. In fact, the credibility of our own faith itself is in some ways at stake. But our Transfiguration experience says a mountain is a place you come down from; a church is a place you go out from, to join Christ’s mission of building the bonds of our common humanity and of helping us each discover our own and others’ beloved nature as God’s children. So look and listen, then come down, go forward and reach out.^{xi}

ⁱ On this last Sunday after the Epiphany we hear the story of the disciples’ mountaintop experience of Jesus transfigured as a Being of Light. At the end of the Epiphany season, and at the threshold of Lent, there is no better vantage point than this brilliant mountain of transfiguration - something of a continental divide, as it were. From it we look back to the Jordan River baptism of Jesus that began his public Galilean ministry, but then, also look ahead to the road to Jerusalem—to a cross, and beyond.

ⁱⁱ Moses transfigured on Mount Sinai, and Elijah on the mountain (1 Kings 19:9-18) and also his experience of being taken up in the whirlwind.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Malachi 4:4-5. This story of the Transfiguration has awesome visual images of Jesus shining and his clothes bathed in dazzling light, with the presence of Moses and Elijah and the three disciples, with

the bright cloud above. And then the scene shifts from the visual to the auditory – from sight to sound – when a voice declares the same powerful confirmation about Jesus that was stated at the beginning of his public ministry – at his baptism, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased;” and an added message to the disciples, “Listen to him!” At that moment all the dramatic sights and sounds disappear; it’s just Jesus with his three disciples on the mountain.

Now on the one hand, all the visual drama associated with this story is important as a powerful confirmation to Jesus and his disciples of his true being and mission, with the light, Moses and Elijah and the bright cloud comprising the part of the story most remembered as The Transfiguration. On the other hand, for someone like me who hasn’t experienced such powerful light or spectacular company, the transfiguring moment in this story isn’t so much in all the dramatic visuals, but more in listening to the voice that declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” And for me it shifts to, “You are my beloved son or daughter” a powerful transfiguring message because that voice comes to me and you, again and again – more often in hidden and quiet ways. Rediscovering our true selves as beloved usually comes through reconnecting with our blessedness and purpose in the everyday circumstances of our lives. This asks of us that we listen with an attentive ear to all the people and places in our lives where the disguised or hidden voice may be calling each of us. Listening for the voice that says you are my beloved son or daughter – and letting that sink in – is the transfiguring path to become aware not only of our own beloved nature but also that of others. This is not an easy path of course – as we often encounter others “through a glass darkly” as St. Paul wrote. Or as Thomas Merton put it, “There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Now all this brilliance and brilliant company wasn’t just for show, nor just for Jesus’ own benefit, affirming as that may have been for him. Jesus went up the mountain *a/so* to have his disciples directly experience something that would enable them to grasp the significance and impending consequences of joining him in his public ministry, and to be encouraged to follow him through some hard and harrowing days ahead. Jesus wanted to equip these three disciples in particular with a powerful and mystical experience that would provide deep affirmation that they were headed in the right direction, were following the right person, and could hearken back to this when the going got especially tough.

^{iv} T.S. Eliot, “Dry Salvages” in Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1943), p. 24

^v As such they represent two contrasting ways of presenting this particular religious experience to those who weren’t there, and contrasting ways of addressing the meaning and truth claims associated with it.

^{vi} Or another example happened on the tour group I led to Israel in which at every significant site, this one person in the group would, say, “Alright everyone! Turn and face me for a group picture.” So, 15 times a day we couldn’t just stand and soak in the amazing site—instead, we had to turn our backs to the site and have yet another photo—what, to prove we were there?

^{vii} Heidi Hadsell, “Experiencing the Holy, Sharing Our Faith” in *Zion’s Herald*, May/June 2005, pp. 35-36. That may not be so bad, except that Professor Hadsell points out, “This hang-up on proof and [the] related insistence that there is only one way of expressing truth—sets up many of the disputes between religions because it creates an either/or. The logic is not a simple ‘Here is our experience of [the presence and purposes of God; let’s] listen and try to understand what happened,’ which is more the spirit of [Matthew’s] text. Rather the logic...from 2 Peter [is that], not content to [just] describe the experience, it goes on to call its own experience ‘truth’ and the experience of others ‘myth’.”

^{viii} Professor Hadsell illustrates this point by describing her dear Great Aunt Lena: “Aunt Lena was a life-long Presbyterian. She answered every question about why Presbyterians did one thing or another by replying that the Catholics did the opposite; for her that was simply enough of an explanation. Yet, although it sounds strange, or even funny, in a much more ecumenical age, I suspect many of us are not that far removed from Aunt Lena’s conviction that if her tradition was right, other traditions must be wrong. In fact, those other traditions being wrong was one of the major ways (or proofs) she knew that hers was right.” *Ibid.*

^{ix} See David Brooks, “Tree of Failure” in The New York Times, January 13, 2011 – “So, of course, you get narcissists who believe they or members of their party possess direct access to the truth. Of course you get people who prefer monologue to dialogue. Of course you get people who detest politics because it frustrates their ability to get 100 percent of what they want. Of course you get people who gravitate toward the like-minded and loathe their political opponents. They feel no need for balance and correction.”

^x And sadly, it is played out in ways that go far beyond basic incivility. As Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman stated recently, “Politeness may be a virtue, but there’s a big difference between bad manners and calls, explicit or implicit, for violence; insults aren’t the same as incitement. The point is that there is room in a democracy for people who ridicule and denounce those who disagree with them; [but] there isn’t any place for eliminationist rhetoric, for suggestions that those on the other side of a debate must be removed from that debate by whatever means necessary. And it’s the saturation of our political discourse — and especially our airwaves — with eliminationist rhetoric that lies behind the rising tide of violence [and our deepening polarization].” See Paul Krugman, “Climate of Hate” in The New York Times, January 9, 2011. Again, so many divisions between people in our political and religious life come not from transforming/transfiguring events themselves, but from what we do with them afterwards. Hadsell states [Ibid.] that, “We rush too quickly from the experience...to our interpretation of what it means, and often even more urgently to establishing who is right about what it means and who is wrong...that we risk losing the experience [itself] in the process. In fact, as...Brazilian Protestant theologian Rubem Alves states, sometimes we have the interpretation already prepared and at hand even before we have the experience, and indeed, often even in spite of the nature of the experience itself!”

^{xi} On the mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus rediscovered his own belovedness, his source of power to carry the heavy burden of his mission ahead. And he helped his disciples rediscover their own beloved nature, because we all need reminding. Today’s Gospel is chiefly a story about Jesus’ identity and calling as the Beloved Son of God; but insofar as we belong to him, it is a story about our identity and calling as well.

The calling of Jesus and voice he hears both at his baptism in the Jordan River and here on the mountain of Transfiguration, first and foremost is not about discerning a particular perspective or task. The voice, the call heard, is first of all about the delight of God in this Beloved Son. This is not a voice calling out what to do or how to do it, but a calling that names as beloved a son. And as it is for Jesus, so it is for us. Our first calling is the one that simply loves and names: “You are my daughter, my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” These words of this Voice embrace with unconditional love, and promise to hold us forever. This is where it begins; this is the source of all empowerment; and this is where it is renewed. If we listen to this voice it will then become a call to action, right action along a right path.

As that was a challenge even for Jesus, that is surely our challenge as well; namely, to distinguish the voice of God who calls us each God’s beloved son or daughter, from other voices that speak to us: the voices of our parents echoing from years past, the voices of teachers, coaches, employers, friends and acquaintances, voices of our popular culture, voices of need or entitlement, fear or urgency deep within us. These voices are neither bad nor good in and of themselves. God often speaks to us through them. But if followed indiscriminately, such voices can dominate us or fragment us and lead us along a wrong path. See Henri Nouwen’s Life of the Beloved.