

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B) – February 15, 2015
2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Transfiguration: Rediscovering our Belovedness and Confirming our Call

Today is the Last Sunday of the Epiphany season, with Lent beginning this Wednesday – Ash Wednesday. Our Sunday lessons in 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; then to the calling of his first disciples who left all that was familiar to them when he said, “follow me.” We then encountered Jesus in his public healing ministry. And today we hear of a journey three of the disciples take with Jesus up and then down a mountain, and onward toward Jerusalem. In the lives of those in these stories, as well as in our lives, and in all of what we are about as a parish – this Epiphany season was no time to sit down and prop up your feet. Epiphany means “shine.” This Epiphany season has meant rise and shine!

This gospel reading from Mark of the Transfiguration of Jesus, with Moses and Elijah, represents the shining forth of the Light of the World – the hoped-for Messiah – 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 in our midst today, just before we begin the Lenten season of preparation – of our own walk with Jesus toward Jerusalem and beyond.

This story 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, and a bright cloud above. But 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 an added message to the disciples, “Listen to him!” Then all the dramatic sights and sounds disappear; it’s just Jesus with his three disciples on the mountain.

On the one hand, all the visual drama associated with this Transfiguration 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 often most memorable part of the story. On the other hand, for someone like me who hasn’t experienced such powerful light or spectacular company, the Transfiguration 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.” And for me it shifts to, “You are my beloved son or daughter” a powerful transfiguring message because that voice comes to me and to you, again and again –albeit 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, and not just in mountaintop experiences. 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 us. Listening for the voice that says

you are my beloved son or daughter – and letting that sink in – is the transfiguring path to becoming 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.”ⁱ

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; and this occurs at the pivotal moment when Jesus actively assumes his full solidarity with humankind as he heads toward the showdown with fear and violence, the consequences of which will involve his own death.ⁱⁱ The calling of Jesus and voice he hears both at his baptism in the Jordan River and here on the mountain, first and foremost is not about a job or particular task. Neither Jesus nor his disciples hear, “Okay, boys, here’s the plan.” Rather, 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 first 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

Today’s Gospel is chiefly a story about Jesus’ identity and calling as the Beloved Son of God; and insofar as we belong to him, it is a story about our identity and calling as well. Therefore, this event on the mountain of Transfiguration leads us to consider the meaning of vocation, from the Latin word meaning “call”, a word that has lost much of its resonance or importance by its being reduced to denoting simply a job or a career or a particular task. Now recall that Jesus himself had to distinguish the voice confirming his Belovedness from other voices of self-doubt, fear and urgency which fueled his temptations to be something other than his true self (as we’ll hear more about next week on the first Sunday of the Lenten season). Many voices call for our attention. There is a voice that says, “Prove that you are a good person,” like the voice that tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Other voices tell us, “Be sure to become successful, or powerful or popular,” like the other voices that tempt Jesus – voices that play not so much to an arrogance in our spirits, but rather prey (that’s p-r-e-y) on our doubts that we aren’t beloved enough or good enough and thus have to prove it.

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, such as 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; voices of 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.

In my own life, I have listened – and still listen – to a number of voices. One of them is more a non-voice if you will, of a father that left our family when I was eight years old and who never returned. That voice is a voice that says, “Be responsible; don’t be like your father – be the husband and the father your father was not.” Beyond that is another voice that says, “You are no good – unless you can demonstrate the opposite by never stopping your working, your giving, your excelling, whatever.” And there are also the voices of others’ expectations saying, “Be with me; appreciate me; lose some weight,” etc. etc. But through, in and underneath all these voices there is a quieter but persistent voice saying, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased;” or as one of the leaders from a former parish told me during a more stressed-out moment, saying “Kevin, you’re good; and that is good enough.” That’s the voice I – we all – need most of all to hear. And it is there speaking to each of us.^{iv}

Our task is to discern with all our faculties by prayer and attentiveness to all the people in our lives – and in dialogue with all sorts of voices – to discern therein the voice of God speaking to us. This enables us to walk through life – and our life together – with a stable sense of well-being and true belonging. In my life, knowing intimately the mood swings, anxiety levels, self-doubts, stresses and anxious toil—as well as the dreams and joys—in seven other parishes of all sizes and contexts in my 34 years as a parish priest, I think I can assume that this rediscovery of the sense of belovedness in each of *you* in this parish, may be a fruitful spiritual discipline over the Lenten season ahead. As a more mature Peter reflects many years after his experience on the mountain of Transfiguration, recalling the voice that said, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased;” he writes (II Peter 1:17-19), “You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.”

ⁱ Jonathan Montaldo, ed. *A Year With Thomas Merton: Daily Meditations from His Journals* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 81.

ⁱⁱ As the disciples – and we – hear the voice, it reveals to each of us that our real identity and purpose and power lie not on the edges of our existence where we can boast of our unique talents and privileges; but rather in the center of our being as a beloved son or daughter of God. And we can discover this more fully in a community of faith. Here we can realize our dependence on God and build the bonds of our common humanity.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am indebted to some of the ideas put forth in Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (Crossroad, 1992).

^{iv} Now finally, on the one hand, I could say that to hear that voice we need to block out all other voices, and through listening prayer and attentiveness we can then hear the hidden voice of God call us by name and bless us as God’s beloved son or daughter. But on the other hand, rather than blocking out, I have discovered a number of transfiguring moments when God is speaking even in, and especially through, many different voices and moods.