

## Epiphany Last - Transfiguration - Year A

When someone gifted me with a new chasuble set over a year ago, it was blue – and beautiful. Just like my green one, but in blue. And while blue is one of my favorite colors, liturgically it is worn only during the four weeks of Advent. So I would get to wear it for only those four Sundays. So I asked if we could get it in green instead – and Voila! – Green! Because green is for “*ordinary* time” – the Sundays of the liturgical year not designated as part of one of the other seasons – not Advent or Christmastide, not Lent or Easter – not a feast day like Pentecost – just “*ordinary*” time. Green is the color we use the most often – and I wanted that vestment to be one I could wear often. That green vestment reminds me that “*ordinary*” time is not “plain, old, Ordinary time” – but that it holds beauty *and challenge* of its own.

Today, we are drawing these few weeks after the celebration of Christmas and the Epiphany to a close. We are celebrating the Last Sunday after Epiphany – before we move into Lent. This is a transition day – and it is marked as the Feast of the Transfiguration. Each year – no matter which of the three cycles of readings we are in (and this year we’re in Cycle A, if you were wondering) – each year, on this last Sunday of Epiphany just before we begin the season of lent, we hear one version or another of the story of Jesus leading Peter, James, and John up the mountain, where he is *transfigured* before their eyes. There Jesus stands, with his face shining like the sun and his robes dazzling white – Moses and Elijah standing with him – all of them being overshadowed by a bright cloud from which a voice says: “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased! *Listen* to him!” There, on the mountain, Peter, James and John had an *extra-ordinary* experience of God. When they heard the voice, Matthew tells us that they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear – but I think awe is probably closer to the truth. They felt the awe of being overcome by God’s presence with them. They had the true “mountaintop experience.”

In our first reading from Exodus, we heard of a mountaintop experience of Moses. A cloud overshadows *him* as well. He waits for *six days* – notice that in our Gospel passage, it was “Six days later” when Jesus and the apostles go up *their* mountain. Moses waits for six days – and then God speaks to him. The scriptures are heavily sprinkled with mountaintop experiences. Abraham went up the mountain to sacrifice Isaac and found a God who did not require human sacrifice, but asked for *relationship*. God told *Elijah* to go stand on the mountain because God would be passing by – and Elijah found God not in the wind or the fire or the earthquake, but in the still, small voice. Noah’s Ark ended up on the top of Mt. Ararat. Moses meets God and receives the commandments on the mountain covered by a cloud. And in today’s Gospel, Jesus invites Peter, James, and John into their own mountaintop experience.

And we have these moments in our own lives, whether actual mountains are involved or not. Sr. Linda-Susan and I headed for the Grand Canyon the day I finished my last chemo treatment on my birthday in 1992. I had been there as a child and it had moved me deeply. In 1992, I was once again overwhelmed by the expression of the grandeur and beauty and immensity of God that I found there. When we returned to the Grand Canyon last month, I was captured again – like the disciples, overcome by awe. It is the same awe you experienced when you saw your child or grandchild for the first time, or when you are transfixed looking at the sunset over Lake Michigan.

The thing to note here, though, is that these very powerful, transformative experiences of God do not happen every day. Neither Moses, nor Abraham, nor Elijah, nor Jesus nor the apostles *stayed* on the mountaintop. We had a return flight from the canyon. You do not have new grandbabies every day. Rather, those moments of being profoundly touched by the presence of God, by design, prepare us, equip us, strengthen us, if you will, for coming *down* from the mountain. We live in “ordinary” time. Yes, most of the time of our lives is “ordinary” green time.

When the disciples are bowed down full of awe, we are told this: “But Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’” That is the message for us, after the mountaintop experiences. Get up. Do not be afraid. Do what you are called to do. Wait the six days – and then hear and know that this Jesus is God’s beloved Son. Listen to him – which really means hear and follow. Then get up – and do not be afraid.

I will say that as I pondered mountaintops, I could not help but remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech in which he said famously, “I have been to the mountaintop.” I reread that speech as I was preparing for this morning. He knew the connection between the visions at the top of the mountain and the work to be done when we come down. I encourage you to read that sermon if you have not lately. It would be a good way to bring Black History month to closure, perhaps.

What he said in that speech struck me because of its explication or explanation of the truth that, like Peter, we would like to build booths and stay with Jesus on that mountaintop. We would like to rest in those moments of transfiguration, with garments blazing white. But Jesus touches us and tells us to get up. Martin said:

“It's alright to talk about "long white robes over yonder," in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It's alright to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day. It's alright to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”

There is much in King’s speech that is still all too applicable today. At an earlier point in the speech, he was musing about what he would say to God if God had asked him when he would like to live, from the beginning from human history until now. He reviewed so many different important times in history, but finally concludes:

“Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy." Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that [people], in some strange way, are responding--something is happening in our world.”

And that brings me to the words of our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. Our presiding bishop has joined with a group of other Christian leaders – of diverse political persuasions. They have all agreed to fast weekly on Wednesdays starting on Ash Wednesday, as part of a time of prayer for our nation and the world. I encourage you to read his Lenten message on the Episcopal Church website. In an interview about his Lenten message, Bishop Curry said this:

“We are in a desperate situation right now when we are often failing to learn how to live together with difference. And this has nothing to do with partisan politics. This is bigger than that. Democracy depends on the human capacity for relationship. If those relationships aren't there on some fundamental level, the very fabric of the democracy's not going to hold. That is a house divided against itself. And Jesus said it before Lincoln quoted it: "A house divided against itself will not stand." And that is not about where you stand on issues. That's deeper. That is a deeper spiritual, relational reality. How do you get a toehold on that? That is a spiritual issue, and it's going to take some spiritual engagement.”

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The Bishop is right – it is all about relationships. At the micro level, I encourage you to participate in the soup and group sessions we will have on Sunday evenings during Lent. During Lent, we have come down from the mountaintop – stepped away from the weeks of Epiphany where we have seen God revealing Godself. We are in that space where Jesus invites us to Get up – and not be afraid. The work before us is not ordinary – it is the work of change – a change of heart that will change lives. May it be so.

- [Exodus 24:12-18](#) [2 Peter 1:16-21](#) [Matthew 17:1-9](#) [Psalm 2](#)