

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple on Sunday, March 6, 2011.

(Exodus 24:12-18; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9)

This year Epiphany has lasted about as long as it can possibly last. Easter can only come one day later, and we got to hear all the Collects that are assigned for the Sundays after Epiphany. So I'm going to take you way back to the beginning of Epiphany. And in fact, I'm going to review you on a sermon that I preached at the beginning of the season of Epiphany. And if you recall, I preached on the difference between epiphany and conversion. An epiphany is that sudden revelation where we catch a peek behind the curtain that shows us some piece of the truth about life that we were not expecting. The "aha" moment. The detective story "aha" moments are epiphanies. These are places where we see or realize something new, something true, and perhaps, only perhaps, life changing.

The Magi from the East came and had their epiphany in the adoration of the baby of Bethlehem. Peter, in this morning's reading, had his epiphany when he answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah," Peter replies. Peter's confession is an epiphany. He's seeing something he hadn't seen before. Well, this season of epiphany comes to its climactic conclusion in today's readings with the stunning realization that the glory of God is revealed in the incarnation in Jesus. And this is not just a gift to the Jews, but to the whole world.

Then there are conversions. In a conversion experience, I don't just see something new, I become someone new. On the road to Damascus, when Jesus, as a blinding light, stops Saul in his tracks, Saul is changed to Paul, a Pharisee who has been willing to persecute and kill Christians, becomes a Christian helping other Christians pursue grace and reconciliation. And thus Paul's conversion led to many other epiphanies and conversions, but especially epiphanies about breaking down walls, walls between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and masters, men and women. So epiphany, glorious presence of God manifest, made visible to us in a very sudden, unexpected way and conversion for Christians, meaning seeking the kingdom of God, changing our direction by following Jesus and therefore turning away any path that is self seeking or self destructive.

So epiphany conversion and now transfiguration. What does transfiguration mean? You got that off the top of your Episcopal lexicon? Maybe not. If epiphany is a sudden realization and conversion is a sudden change of direction, what is a transfiguration? Well, let's review the scene. Jesus, like Moses, goes up to the top of the mountain for a special kind of encounter. Jesus, like Moses, takes a couple of select friends up the mountain while leaving the rest behind. Jesus, like Moses, comes into a particular and unique presence of God. His face changes, he shines, his raiment shines. There is a change. This transfiguration has elements of epiphany, a sudden realization and conversion. The presence of Moses and Elijah imply that Jesus is receiving the legacy of Moses, the law, and the legacy of Elijah, the prophet.

Now, I think we have some question that we can't know about. Is Jesus changing? He's certainly changing in his outward appearance, but think about it. For whose sake? For Peter and James and John's sake. For our sake as the disciples. The transfiguration has to have a witness. Peter and James and John wake up to a new reality. And this new reality is the mystery of the incarnation. Now, days ago Peter had said, "Christ Jesus, you are the Messiah," and by that Peter and his friends were meant to expect a mortal man sent from God to save the Jewish people. But now at the transfiguration, Peter and James and John see that Jesus not only is surrounded by the glory of God, he is emanating the glory of God. Jesus himself manifests the glory of God. So far the disciples had only seen his humanity, and now they're getting a sense of his divinity. The transfiguration is the revelation of the incarnation, Jesus of Nazareth, son of God, fully human, fully divine. With the transfiguration, we see God differently because we see Jesus differently. That's what happens with mountain top experiences. We see everything differently and something breaks through.

The hard part is that you have to come down from the mountain and see if you see yourself differently. Conversion comes later. Peter, James and John are transfixed. They don't want to move. They're fixed in place, such as the dazzling glory of God. Peter wants to stay, build booths, and just stay in the moment. Don't we all just want to stay in certain precious, wonderful moments? And don't they always last too short? And yet Jesus commands that they must come down the mountain. Jesus commands the three to tell no one else about this event, this change that they have witnessed. Why? What else? What more could possibly be added to seeing the glory of God? What else could be added?

Except the journey to Jerusalem must be added. The Last Supper must be added. Betrayal must be added. Heartbreaking suffering must be added. The cross must be added. While the disciples have had an ultimate epiphany on the mountain top, their ultimate conversion must be experienced at the foot of the cross. On the mountain top, they see something different about Jesus, divinity and humanity mysteriously in one. Yet going down the mountain to the foot of the cross to the gates of death and to the sweet joy of resurrection is the ultimate conversion. It is the cross, it is in the figure on the cross, that we see the full humanity and the full divinity. And it will only be after the crucifixion and the resurrection that the disciples will see, will have the epiphany of the power of God's glory to endure and then defy death. It will only be after the crucifixion and resurrection that the disciples will experience conversion. Only after crucifixion and resurrection will those mere students, those studiers, those disciples of Jesus become those whose very lives, whose radiant, self sacrificing lives lead others to Christ. Peter may be transfixed, but it is at the cross he will be transformed.

My friends, it is that time in the church calendar where we stand on a certain mountain top. We have had so many things to celebrate, many blessings in our lives, in the life of the parish. We've had, this last week, two hard celebrations. The celebrations of sending beloved brothers on to be with Christ in heaven. We stand at certain kind of mountain tops of joy. We need not forget that. But it is time to turn our face toward Jerusalem. Lent is coming and Lent is such a rich invitation to self examination and conversion of life. In important ways, Lent is that time for personal reflection and discipline, but what I want to especially emphasize for you this morning is the invitation Lent gives us to share the load. To share our burdens with one another, which is not, by the mystery of Jesus, to be a burden on another, but to share it.

Prayer is the way that we share the joys and the burdens of this walk to the cross. But no matter how brief our mountain top joys or how long and difficult the road of discipleship, the good news is that we're in this together. We are only we because we are in Christ. We are the people of God who serve God by being present at this table, by being present in prayer and by being present to one another to share the journey.

So it's time to breathe deep of that mountain air. Breathe in the glorious radiance of God's presence everywhere and then put on our walking shoes, go down that mountain, go back to some various valleys of life, walk on to Jerusalem and whatever crosses we are given to bear, and walk on the life that will meet us there. Thanks be to God. Amen.