

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

We've come to the last Sunday after the Epiphany which is always Transfiguration Sunday. It has been a season in which the true nature of Jesus has been revealed to us in some fairly dramatic ways, but none quite as dramatic as the story we've just heard this morning. The season began with the arrival of the Wise Men who followed the light of a star to locate the infant Jesus. And when they found him, they knew instinctively that they had found the King of the Jews. This information is given to us in the Gospel of Matthew. We mark the Wise Men's arrival at the feet of Jesus as the Epiphany of the Lord...the revelation of the true nature of Jesus. The next Sunday, we heard from the Gospel of Mark. We were reminded of the events surrounding Jesus' baptism when the dove descended on him and a voice from heaven spoke to him saying, "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well pleased." That message was directed to Jesus personally, although it's been documented, so it must have been overheard by others. The next week, in the gospel of John, we learned of the beginning of Jesus' choosing of his disciples and the immediate recognition by Nathanael that the rabbi, Jesus, (whom he had just met) was indeed the Son of God, the King of Israel. During the first three Sundays after the end of the Christmas season, we've heard about Jesus' true nature from three of the four gospels. On the fourth Sunday, the gospel of Mark tells us about Jesus' teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum and his dramatic exorcism of an evil spirit possessing a man in the congregation. Jesus, then, is a man who has dominion over the evil forces in the world. The following Sunday we hear another story from the gospel of Mark about Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and countless others who crowded around her front door seeking Jesus' healing powers. His gesture to lift her by the hand to help her out of bed is reminiscent of resurrection, so this is a man who has the power to restore the human body. And we hear for the first time about Jesus' need to slip away from others and have time for solitude and prayer. Today marks the last Sunday in the season after the Epiphany. This last Sunday is always Transfiguration Sunday. Also from the gospel of Mark, it is the most dramatic of the stories revealing Jesus' true nature. And it appears in the gospels of Matthew and Luke as well. It's important. It is the culmination of a series of revelations about the true nature of Jesus as the Son of God.

As the gospel lesson unfolds this morning, we learn that Jesus has taken three of his disciples, Peter, James, and John on a hike to the top of Mt. Tabor. At the summit, Jesus' appearance radically changes. He becomes luminescent from the inside out. Even his clothes are a dazzling white. And while the disciples are watching they realize that Jesus is talking to two other men: One is Moses and the other is Elijah. Both these men were powerful prophets of God and both

of them had experienced personal encounters with God. We are reminded of Moses' arrival at the foot of Mt. Sinai after his encounter with God at the summit receiving the Ten Commandments. His face was so bright with the light of God that he had to cover it so that he could move safely among the Israelites [Exodus 34:29-35]. And that was not the only transcendental moment that Moses had with God. Do you remember the burning bush that called Moses into God's service in the first place? Well, exactly like that phenomenon, Jesus' transfiguration is not to be approached with the assumption that we can understand it. We can't explain it away or understand it. It means to draw us in toward what is abnormal, unnatural—like the burning fire that does not consume the bush in Moses' first encounter with God [Exodus 3:1-6] and like the fire Elijah hoped for and received from God on the altar drenched in water to win the wager against the prophets of Baal about whose God was more powerful...and the *only* God! [1 Kings 18] The transfiguration places Jesus in the lineage and honor of the two prophets who stand beside him on the mountaintop. To say that Jesus is in rarified air at the summit of Mt. Tabor is an understatement and is both metaphorical and literal. At the Transfiguration, then, Jesus stands in impressive company, sharing the moment with two others who know what it is to share close communion with God...to see God face-to-face...and to frustrate that pesky and seemingly unyielding boundary between life and death. Moses and Elijah are very much dead to this world and Jesus is very much alive to this world. On this occasion, however, all three of them seem to have successfully navigated that pesky boundary between life and death.

And what must Peter and James and John be thinking? How did all of this affect them? Put yourself in their place. All they did was agree to go on a hike with Jesus to the top of Mt. Tabor. What would *you* think if you were in their shoes? This is their teacher...their friend...the one they believe may, in fact, be the Son of God. They revere him. They follow him...wherever he goes. They hang on his every word and they witness his actions that defy the actions of mere mortals. The luminescent Jesus must have been both terrifying and fascinating! The transfiguration is not about the transformation of Jesus. The transfiguration is the revelation of the inner power that *is* Jesus. Transformation is what happens to Peter and James and John when their internal personalities and worldviews are changed in the presence of the transfigured Jesus. They will never again be the same. They know what they saw. They know what they heard. They've been to the mountaintop. And they have been transformed.

We can only imagine what Moses and Elijah were discussing with Jesus at the top of that mountain within the cloud that settled upon them. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He has set his face toward Jerusalem and the culmination of his ministry and mission on earth. He knows what lies ahead...torture, ridicule, physical pain, separation from those he loves, betrayal and crucifixion. He also knows that the resurrection lies ahead. Was he seeking reassurance? Was his mission being reinforced by Moses and Elijah? Were they shoring Jesus up for what lies

ahead and lending him their strength to follow through? We can only speculate about *their* conversation. But we do know that there was another voice that bellowed from that cloud that had descended on those three. It was a booming voice not directed at Jesus himself as the voice at his baptism was. This voice was directed at Peter and James and John...and to all of us!! This voice proclaimed to them that Jesus was his Son and the voice commanded them: "Listen to him!" Having been transformed themselves by witnessing the transfiguration of Jesus, both their hearts and their minds were in a receptive mood to hear and take action on the voice they heard from the cloud surrounding Moses and Elijah and Jesus.

At one time or another during our lives, most of us have had a glimpse of...or perhaps a full-blown...mountaintop experience. It's the sort of thing that makes us breathe a little deeper and look a little farther. It is the kind of experience that is both thrilling and satisfying. Those moments are hard to recreate. And those moments are hard to share in conversation with others. There are no adequate words to describe it...and perhaps we won't be believed. We'd like to stay there. We'd like to live on that mountaintop, but we know that our lives await us at the bottom of the mountain. We must descend to the bottom of the mountain just as Jesus had to leave that thrilling moment and descend back into the life he had taken up to salvage all of creation. He knows what awaits him there...the culmination of his mission. We also know what lies there for us. The church has a responsibility: to listen to God's Son. That is our mission and those are our marching orders. Listening does not result in staying aloof where the air is pure and the view is stunning. The church must listen to the voice of God's Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross...of self-sacrifice...of loving others more than self. We are not called to have power over others but to rise up as dust that has been formed by the breath of God and to give life to others, especially those who are neglected by the powerful. We're called upon to get our hands dirty and our faces smudged in the trenches of the dispossessed.

We are heading into the season of Lent. It is the season of self-examination, of study, of taking stock of ourselves and of amending our ways. It is a season designed to be transformational. We head into that experience on the exhilarating wings of the transfiguration. Having listened to God's word; having experienced God's love; having embraced Jesus as the one who salvages us and saves us, we are preparing ourselves for that transformation that can happen during Lent. May we never forget the transformational nature of our own mountaintop experiences when we have seen the light and have come face to face with the God who loves us and the Son who saves us. Having done all of this...we will never again be the same!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.