

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. We've seen the revelation of the identity of Jesus in the visit by the Magi; the baptism of Jesus when a voice from the heavens identifies him as "My Son in whom I am well pleased;" the calling of Philip who was from the same city as Andrew and Peter and the declaration by Philip's friend, Nathanael, that Jesus truly is the Son of God; the calling of Andrew and Peter and James and John as disciples; the authoritative teaching in the synagogue and the exorcism of the unclean spirit in a man in the congregation at Capernaum; and the raising of Peter's very ill mother-in-law and the healing of throngs of people gathered outside her door; and now this...the ultimate stunning and irrefutable revelation of the identity of Jesus...the mountaintop transfiguration in the presence of Peter and James and John. It's hard to deny that there is something extraordinary and even other-worldly about this man named Jesus.

This particular story...the transfiguration...transitions us from the revelation and identity of Jesus and all the powers he possesses in the season of Epiphany and ushers us into the season of Lent in which we become aware of all the suffering that he will endure on his way to the Cross. These stories about Jesus help us move from one season to the next and enable us to see the magnitude of his mission and the scope of the Kingdom of God that he shows us.

The transfiguration is the essence of a mountaintop experience. We've all had them in one form or another...these mountaintop experiences...in small ways and in significant ways. They are those experiences that flood us with powerful positive emotions and tend to block out all the limitations that we normally encounter. They are special. They are a taste of the kingdom of God and the life possible in the world to come. They fill us with hope and with indelible memories. More of this is what is waiting for us after this life has ended.

Last Sunday afternoon, I was fortunate enough to be able to be present at Evensong at the National Cathedral. It's a service that is available at 4:00 every Sunday afternoon. If you haven't attended one, I highly recommend that you treat yourself to one of the most beautiful services the Episcopal Church offers. At this particular Evensong last Sunday, the Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry was on hand to install the Rt. Rev. Carl Walter Wright as Canon to the Cathedral in charge of the Armed Forces Chaplaincy and to celebrate the New Ministry of the Rev. Leslie Steffensen as his assistant, the Canon to the Ordinary. I was there because the Rev. Leslie is one of my clergy colleagues. Bishop Curry was also the preacher at this service. And if you'd never heard him preach, please do so if you have the opportunity. He's one of the most elegant, eloquent and energetic preachers in the Episcopal Church.

On this particular occasion, Bishop Curry preached on mountaintop experiences and surely for Bishop Wright and for Rev. Leslie this was, indeed, a mountaintop experience as all ordinations, installations and celebrations of New Ministry are. Bishop Curry reminded us that ancient peoples looked to the mountains as the location where they were most likely to encounter God. In the Celtic tradition, the borders between earth and heaven are on the mountaintops. They are referred to as the 'thin' places...the places where earth and heaven are so close to one another that heaven can slip right into the earthly realm...and does.

We can all remember Moses and his encounter with God on the top of Mt. Sinai when he was given the Ten Commandments...that set of instructions that tell us how to be in relationship with God and how to be in relationship with one another. The key word there is 'relationship' because God and Jesus are all about relationship. When Moses returned to ground level and re-joined his people, he had to wear a veil to shield his people from the frightening and profound radiance of his face after having had a direct encounter with God.

And so we encounter Jesus this morning on top of Mt. Tabor with Peter and James and John as witnesses. It must have been terrifying for them to look up and see Jesus transfigured into someone luminescent with the radiance of God...recognizable in human form but displaying all the glory that was God's and his. And there he was, talking with Elijah and with Moses who were also present in all their heavenly glory. This was far more than a group hallucination!! There is something exquisitely hopeful about seeing these three together...all of them in their glory...two who had clearly left this earthly existence and one, Jesus, who had a foot in each realm...one foot clearly and still rooted in his earthly body and existence and one foot in heaven with all his glory intact and in communion with Moses and Elijah. The significance of that moment is unmistakable. You can't miss it!! The boundary between earthly life and heavenly life may not be as rigid as we sometimes think.

We heard this morning the story of how Elijah left his earthly existence...while he and Elisha continued to walk and talk, a chariot of fire with horses of fire separated the two of them and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven...leaving Elisha distraught and clearly his successor in prophesying to Israel. It was an uncharacteristically unique and spectacular departure from this life and entry into the next. That Elijah would be standing at the top of Mt. Tabor and speaking with Moses and Jesus is one of the most hopeful visions we could ever have.

As distressing as it is to be parted in this life by earthly death, there is something very hopeful and comforting and reassuring about seeing Jesus and Moses and Elijah together at the top of that mountain, conferring with one another...being in communion with one another. They are clearly in relationship with each other. They are clearly in touch with one another. They are clearly together. And we can't help but think and hope and believe that such will be the case for us as well. Our belief is that we are still in communion and relationship with those we love who have died...who have crossed the boundary between earth and heaven and gone before

us...who have left earth, but have not left the earthly ties they made with us. Our hope and our belief is that these ties still exist and that we will be reunited with them one day, just as we see Jesus momentarily reunited with Moses and Elijah on the mountain top.

As if the transfiguration itself were not enough to reveal to us and to Peter and James and John the ultimate glory and power that belongs to Jesus, the punctuation of this other-worldly experience came in the form of the cloud that descended on them. From this cloud came a clear voice saying, "This is my Son. Listen to him." Coming down from that mountain, there could have been no doubt in the minds of Peter and James and John that what they instinctively knew and suspected about Jesus...that he was the true and only Son of God...was in fact a fact. Jesus had said to them, "Follow me." Now the voice from heaven says to them, "Listen to him!"

How could they refuse? How can we refuse? Knowing what we do about Jesus. Experiencing as we do our own mountaintop experiences that flood us with positive emotion and stir up our spirits and give us a glimpse of the nature of the Kingdom of God...how could we not listen to him? How could we not follow him? How could we not travel with him to the cross even though we have no idea what our own cross will look like? How could we not put our trust in Him even though we ourselves don't see or understand the larger picture?

Jesus told us how to get to the mountain top...how to find the kingdom of God even in this life. He told us to love God and to love one another. To be in relationship with God and to be in relationship with each other. That's how we help usher in the kingdom of God. And love isn't just a feeling. Love is an action word. Love is attending to God in prayer. Love is keeping God in focus in our lives. Love is in worshipping and praising God in all circumstances. Love is going out of our way to be kind to the person who doesn't like us or perhaps the person we don't like. Love is sitting quietly next to the person going through a hard time. Love is noticing what's going on around us and lending a hand. Love is the smile to a stranger. Love is any thoughtful act. Love is shared laughter. Love is joining in the celebration of someone else's joy. Love is sharing what we have in outrageous generosity. And sometimes love is knowing when to be still and be quiet and to respect someone else's boundaries. Above all, love is forgiveness on every level...sometimes most importantly for ourselves.

The story of the transfiguration is a reminder that the kingdom of God is not as remote and distant as we might imagine. It is the hope of what lies ahead...the hope of reunion with loved ones, the hope of our own mountaintop experiences, the hope of what lies beyond the cross of Christ. And it is a reminder of the power of Jesus available to us to see us through all that we must endure in this life on our way to the next.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.