

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Have you ever tried to understand something and just couldn't wrap your brain around it? No matter how it was explained to you or how many questions you asked or how much you read about it...you just couldn't 'get it'? Sometimes, that's the way it is with Jesus and the things that Jesus tries to teach us. Some 2000 years later, we are still interpreting what he said and did and are sometimes still guessing...and even arguing with each other...about whether or not we've got it right.

Today is the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. All through this season, we have been reviewing the revelations and the recognition of the true identity of Jesus. The revelation of the nature and character of God himself has been made in the person of Jesus Christ. It began with the appearance of the Magi who knew who they were looking for and followed the light of the bright star in order to find him. It seems significant that there was light involved here. Hold on to that thought. When the Magi arrived at the location of the baby, Jesus, they recognized him as the Messiah.....the savior of the chosen people of Israel.....the savior, in fact, of the whole world. This little baby, Jesus, would be the one who would usher into the world the kingdom of God.....and they knew it.

We watched the faces of Simeon and Anna light up when Jesus' parents brought him to the Temple. They knew they were looking at the Messiah!

We saw the dove hover over Jesus when he came up out of the water after his baptism. And we heard the voice from heaven say, "This is my Son, the Beloved. In him I am well pleased."

We watched as he called his first disciples and we listened to the lessons Jesus gave about the nature of the kingdom of God in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus told us who the blessed people were and it was quite the opposite of the prevailing wisdom among men at the time...and even among us in our own time. Throughout this season, we have listened to Jesus tell us not only what the kingdom of God looks like, but his instructions to us in how we were to behave in order to usher in that kingdom...and to prepare ourselves to be a part of that kingdom. He charged us with being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And he challenged us to go beyond the letter of the law...to go a bit farther and dig a bit deeper....to capture the spirit behind it and to behave accordingly. And he taught us how to love as he loves and as our Father in heaven loves us.....our enemies as well as our friends.

And now, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, we are startled by a story that reveals even more clearly exactly who Jesus is. In case we've missed it up until now, this mountain top experience makes it perfectly clear. Jesus is the Son of God...as God announces to those present... just as God's voice did at Jesus' baptism. A voice boomed out from the bright cloud that descended on the top of that mountain: "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." The identification and the instruction could not be any clearer. These are almost the same words that God spoke at Jesus' baptism...with the addition of the phrase: "Listen to him." We have to ask ourselves...what part of this do we not 'get'? What part don't we understand? What part would we prefer to ignore?

Imagine, if you can, what it must have been like for Peter and James and John to be witness to this earth-shattering event. And it *was* earth-shattering! At Jesus' request, they have gone with him to the top of the mountain not knowing what to expect. Before they realize what's going on...and while Jesus is praying...Jesus is transformed right before their very eyes. He 'lights up' in a way that makes him luminescent. His face shines in an other-worldly fashion as if he had been lit by an enormously strong light from within. His clothing becomes dazzling white. And he is joined in conversation by Moses and Elijah. How could Peter and James and John... these sensible and completely human men...make any sense at all out of what they were seeing? The sight

before them defied any rational explanation. The disciples did not hear the conversation among those three...Jesus and Moses and Elijah...and they could not possibly have realized at that moment that what they were seeing was a preview of what lay ahead for Jesus. They didn't know that the three of them were talking about Jesus' mission, his last journey to Jerusalem and what lay before him on the cross. Even if they had heard the conversation, which apparently they didn't, they wouldn't have understood what in the world Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about. They didn't 'get it.' Although they were startled at Jesus' transformation into someone seemingly other worldly.

The transfiguration marks a halfway point in Jesus' journey which at every turn and every stop was beyond the customary experience of mere mortals. Each experience in its own way defied explanation, but nothing internalizes information more profoundly than our own personal experience. Even if we don't understand what we are looking at, we cannot deny or dismiss what we have experienced and seen and heard and neither could Peter and James and John. As much as what they had seen defied explanation, they knew what they had seen and they knew what they had experienced.....and it was beyond anything that had ever happened to any of them before. They would never again be quite the same even if they couldn't explain it to anyone.

Just six days before this trek up the mountain, Jesus had posed a question to his disciples when there were rumors circulating that Jesus might be John the Baptist returned from the dead. Jesus wants to know who *they* think he is. Peter is the one who steps forward and identifies Jesus as the Messiah...the one who is to come to save the chosen people of Israel. Peter recognizes Jesus for who he is. But Jesus goes on to tell him that what lies ahead for Jesus is an arrest, a trial, and the merciless death on the cross. This makes no sense to Peter at all. If Jesus is the Messiah, he's going to be the ruler and savior of Israel. He's going to sit on King David's throne not be hung from a cross like a common criminal. Peter is frantic to prevent such a thing from happening. He tries to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem. This can't happen!! It must not happen! And Jesus rebukes him for trying to tempt him into avoiding the culmination of the mission for which Jesus has been sent to earth in the first place. Peter just doesn't 'get it.'

This transfiguration is a confirmation for Jesus that he is on the right track and that he is about to complete his mission on earth. Just as Jesus would have to endure death on the cross, those who follow him will be required to bear their own crosses...perhaps every day of their lives. The transfiguration of Jesus is a preview of the glory that is to come beyond the cross, but it cannot happen without the cross. Jesus is demonstrating for his followers the necessity of being faithful in tough circumstances. When called to do so, we can't duck the crucial issues of our day and expect that we will reap the rewards of having been faithful. If ever we are forced to make a choice, we must choose Jesus and his teachings.

And it seems that we are almost daily presented with choices that we need to make...remembering that doing nothing is also a choice. Doing nothing doesn't get us off the hook. As a matter of fact, doing nothing may be the very thing for which we are held to account when we stand before our maker. There are any number of things swirling around us every day that need our attention...our intervention...our interference...our response. We have climate change and environmental protections to think about; racial reconciliation that haunts our history and continues to be reflected in our culture; we have the phenomenon of mass murder on a far too frequent basis within our own country to deal with; we have poor people to care for and hungry people to feed; we have people who need medical care but die for lack of it or find themselves financially destitute because of it; and the thing that personally haunts me the most: the separation of children from their parents when they want to cross our border. That's the one that personally will not leave me alone. "DO something!" this voice inside of me says. There seems to be an endless list of circumstances right in front of us that are crying out for a response from us as practicing Christians. What did we learn from Jesus? What is Jesus telling us to do? Do you hear his voice calling you? Will you answer?

The transfiguration is the promise of what will come. It is the assurance that Jesus will see his mission through and that no matter what, Jesus will see us through ours as well. The cross proves that Jesus will not abandon us. But we need to remember that the glory comes *after* the cross,

not before. And without the cross, there is no glory. Without the denial of self, there is no glory. Without the obedience to God, there is no glory.

After God speaks from the cloud that descended on top of the mountain, Elijah and Moses disappear. Jesus is left standing alone and the luminescence that has just transfigured him departs as well. Jesus turns to his disciples who are frozen in place and are still staring in disbelief. He reaches out to them and touches them and tells them not to be afraid. What they have just experienced must have been as terrifying as it was bewildering and enthralling. He tells them not to mention what they have just experienced to anyone until after he has died and has been raised from the dead. There may have been no temptation at all to tell anyone about this. Who would believe them anyway?

As they start their way back down the mountain, they descend from the mountaintop to the ordinary life of ordinary men. It's a life fraught with danger and political intrigue. It is a life Jesus will comply with because it is God's mission for him. That life will appear to have been lost forever on the cross until God raises him from the dead three days later.

The lesson for all of us is that Jesus is with us...no matter what...and always. And that God is present and working His will in the world even today and even in the darkest of moments. We have only to remain faithful, to take up our own cross, to answer God's own call to us, to fulfill our own mission and to trust in the unfailing and undying love of God through Christ Jesus. God showed us the glory that awaits us in the transfiguration of Jesus at the top of the mountain.

Will you follow your heart and go where Jesus leads you?

As you pray about this, God will give you the answer.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.