

“In and Up, Up and In”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
Last Sunday after the Epiphany – 10 & 11 February 2018
Mark 9:2-9

In a few days, the season of Epiphany will end, and Lent will begin. We started Epiphany on January 6th, as we celebrated the arrival at Bethlehem of the magi, or wise men, from the East. Scripture doesn’t tell us how many came searching for a star. Tradition says there were three of them, and we’ll go with that. But however many made the journey, the star caught their attention and motivated them to follow it because of its unique brightness. Something special had to be going on underneath that star, and they really wanted to find out what, or in this case, who.

On the last Sunday of the Epiphany season, we always hear the story of Jesus’ transfiguration, as we did moments ago, of how he ascended a mountain with his three closest disciples. At the top, as Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah, another trio, he was transformed. His clothes shone with a clean, pure, dazzling whiteness impossible to achieve on Earth. It must have seemed as if the star that had hung over Bethlehem had descended to the surface.

So before we enter into the shadows of Lent that lead to the dark evil of the cross, we need to spend some time with that heavenly light of new birth. Before we begin our Lenten practice of opening our eyes and seeing our sin and how it stains us, we need to spend some time with that blinding mountaintop light that illustrated what it means to call Jesus our Lord and Savior. Before we start rooting around in the dank, cluttered closets and basements of our souls, where there’s so much to purge so that we can make more room for Jesus, we need to spend a

moment reflecting on how this Lenten journey eventually leads to an empty tomb on a bright spring morning.

Star, mountaintop transfiguration, the sunlight of Easter morning – these we need to cherish, because the interlude between Epiphany and Easter that we call Lent demands the courage to face our fears, the humility to admit that we’re fooling ourselves about a lot of things, and the peace to abide for 40 days in a wilderness that’s meant to be rough and unsettling. If you coast through Lent with ease, you’re probably not paying attention. So we need to seek and follow the light of Christ on these misty, cloudy days ahead, to guide us on the Way, to keep us going when we’d rather stop, and to show us the truth we need to follow so that we may live fully and freely and joyfully.

It starts with looking for the light, or if you’ve already found the light, looking at it intensely. If you’ll recall, it seems that the three wise men from the East were the only people chasing down that star. When they got to Herod, he had no clue, and neither did his religious chieftains. They’d either missed it, which is hard to imagine, or they didn’t see anything special about it.

Why these three people among the millions living within sight of that light? There’s no way to know in that specific situation, but the scenario sounds familiar. It’s hard to look toward the heavens with our nose to the grindstone most of the time, and there’s plenty of glitter – enticing distractions – that draw our gaze down toward the surface, toward the trivial and superficial, and keep it there.

In Lent, as we look inward, we also need to look upward. We need to carefully examine who we are yet also seek out who we are meant to be by God’s grace. It’s a neck stretcher that cramps us up and makes us sore, but it’s a vital practice, that sacred rhythm of in and up, up and

in. If we don't look up, then our view of what's inside will be warped and confusing, but if we only look up, the light's irrelevant, because we don't have anything personal it can relate to.

This cycle of in and up, up and in, reminds me of a time years ago when my college choir went on tour in Italy and Austria. What an exciting experience – not just the chance to go and see, but the gift of sharing music that might inspire those who heard it. We were in Venice for a few days, scheduled to sing a concert in a church – not a well-known, prominent one; just an ordinary neighborhood parish.

We got there late, so we really had to hustle to change into our concert clothes, and that ramped up the adrenaline beyond the already high pre-performance rush. In short, we were frantic, in a big hurry, and I set a new personal record, getting into my tuxedo in three minutes flat. Not the best way to get ready, with your innards churning like an angry sea, but at least we looked good on the outside, and everybody knows that's what's most important, right?

Anyway, we filed in. There was a good crowd, which is always welcome, but the church, a big barn of a place, centuries old, had been left unfinished. It was not ornate. You could see the bare brick, and high on the West wall, the rose window was just clear glass, no symbols or images from our faith rendered in bright colors, as you'd expect. I felt sorry them, about how grand ambitions and aspirations had gone unfulfilled for generation after generation, likely never to be completed, but there wasn't much time to dwell on that, because we had a concert to give.

Among the pieces in a thick folder of music was a full Latin mass. I can't remember who composed it, but it was powerful in its beauty, and we were singing the Nicene Creed. We got to the part that talks about Jesus' crucifixion and death, and as you might imagine, it was slow and quiet and mournful and very dark, but the very next line speaks of his glorious resurrection, and

the tempo picks up rapidly and the music suddenly brightens as we crank the volume up to full. It's almost violent, that abrupt transition.

And as we sing of the resurrection, fifty voices strong, *et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas*, the sun's setting in the west, and right at that very moment, in that brief six-second span of time, I looked up from my music folder, and the sun lined up with that plain, pitiful, clear-glass window high on the west wall of the church, and the light just flooded through, blinding and miraculous and unfiltered.

It's was more than my eyes could bear, visually and spiritually, so I buried them in my music folder, and when I looked up, it was over. It didn't last long, but it had already been more than enough, this blessing when the truth of faith in song met with the glory of God's creation and they become one. Had I been looking in my folder instead of up at the conductor and the congregation, that sacred moment would have been lost to me.

Now that's an extreme example, and nothing like it has happened in the 25 years since, at least nothing I've noticed, but it serves as a clear example of how necessary it is to look in and look up, if we want the light of grace to burst into our lives. It need not be anything nearly so dramatic. In fact, sometimes it's the really simple stuff, the stuff that's easiest to miss, that reveals God's love in an undeniable and transformative way.

The sacred rhythm of looking in and looking up needs to define our Lent, so that the light of Epiphany and Easter, the light of birth and resurrection, the light of transfiguration can lead us through the shadows, dispersing them as we go, purifying us and making us whole. And you may have noticed that this looking in and looking up is just an exaggerated version of nodding one's head, of quietly saying yes. When we look in and up and up and in, it's our yes to God answering His eternal yes to us. Amen.