

Last Sunday of Epiphany (Year B 2021) Preached by Rev. Anne Harris

2 Kings 2: 1-12, Psalm 50: 1-6, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

Glimpses of the Glory of God

Good morning. I speak to you today in the name of God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

I have a friend who runs her own one room school house. Her Facebook page is filled with funny and sometimes touching stories of her experiences teaching her students. She recently told of a student who said to her,

“Miss Sally, (not her real name) I was going to say that you look like you just got out of bed, but I changed my mind. I’m not going to talk about that.”

Along the same lines, today is Valentine’s Day, (so happy Valentine’s Day!) and although I thought about preaching on St Valentine and the traditions that have sprung from his association with love, I’ve changed my mind and I’m not going to talk about that. Neither am I going to say anything about Covid 19, or the vaccine, or even the atrocious weather that we’ve been having. I’ve changed my mind!

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season when we focus on God’s glory being shown forth in the world.

Quite logically, our Gospel reading today is the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus when Peter, James, and John saw the glory of God shining forth from Jesus. It was an amazing spiritual experience for those three disciples, and one that I hope each person tuning in today has caught a glimpse of at some point in your life, though probably your experience was not quite as vivid as it was for those three disciples. Light is used in the transfiguration story, as a metaphor for the presence of the glory God.

Light is a perfect metaphor for the Glory of God. Light provides the world with energy, and it provides us with the ability to see. Without light, life on earth would be impossible. Light, especially radiantly shining light, draws our attention to God in a way that little else can. Think about it.

Who can fail to see the glory of God when they see the stars of the Milky Way spread out in silvery glory against an inky sky? Or what about when you see towering thunderclouds lit up by giant flashes of lightning on a summer evening? And then there is the splendor of the Northern lights shimmering in the

heavens in the winter, (which I hope to see some day), or more commonly when you see the radiance of a fiery sun rise or sun set.

Of course there are many other ways that God's glory shows through to us that do not involve radiant light. It might be found in music, or art, or even simply in being alone in a quiet place.

Elisha sees the glory of God in wind and fire.

What we heard today is one of the most famous accounts of the life of the great prophet Elijah. I'm going to focus on that today because it gives us an illustration of what it means for us to glimpse the glory of God, and how such glimpses will strengthen us going forth into difficult situations.

Elijah was active during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Just hearing those names, "Ahab and Jezebel" should remind you that Elijah lived at a difficult time in the history of the people of Israel.

Elijah led an exciting life! Propelled by the Spirit of God he confronted Ahab several times, at one point fleeing to a cave in the desert to save his life, and there he was fed by ravens sent by God.

He saved a widow and her son from starvation, and later when the son fell ill and died Elijah brought him back to life.

Back in Israel Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a sort of "duel of the burnt offerings", which of course, he won.

And there are other stories too, to be found in the book of Second Kings. Believe me, Elijah had an impressive resume!

Along with Moses, Elijah is one of the greatest prophets in Judaism. That is of course why the two of them are pictured with Jesus at the transfiguration. You can hardly miss the symbolism in this event. God's glory is seen shining through Jesus who will outshine both of the former prophets.

But getting back to our Old Testament lesson for today, the incident took place at the end of the life of Elijah when he was about to pass his mantle of leadership, literally, to his disciple Elisha.

In his last days Elijah made a journey that took him from one holy place to another, around in a circle.

From Gilgal he went to Bethel where Jacob had laid his head on a stone and dreamt of angels. From Bethel Elijah went to Jericho where Joshua and his little army marched around the city, blowing on ram's horns and shouting, causing the city wall to fall down flat.

And finally Elijah went to the river Jordan, the place where Joshua and the priests had taken the Ark of the Covenant into the water, which then parted, and allowed the people to cross over into the Promised Land.

And God's glory was in each of these places.

And all the journey through, from Gilgal to the Jordan, Elisha would not be not deterred from following his master. In each place, when the people told him that Elijah was about to leave them, Elisha silenced them. He was not ready to hear their warnings. Why? Because he was dreading the loss of his master, whom he loved and revered, and because he was suffering a crisis of confidence in his ability to lead the people as Elijah had done. Elisha had big shoes to fill.

Many of us can empathize with Elisha. As Elijah's right hand man, he was expected to take over the leadership of the people when Elijah passed away. I think Elisha had the same questions that we all have when we are about to do something new, something that will require a lot from us:

Questions like: Can I do this task successfully? Are you with me in this God? What if I fail? Will you help me then?

And that was why he asked Elijah for a double portion of his spirit! He needed the assurance that God would be with him, as he had been with Elijah. Perhaps he felt like he needed twice as much of the Spirit of God to be half as good as his master.

But God was with Elisha as he had been with Elijah before him. Elijah was whisked away by a chariot of fire and a whirlwind, leaving Elisha crying out to him, and tearing his robe in grief.

But that's not the end of the story. There is one more verse that is so meaningful, I don't know why it is omitted from our reading.

Elisha saw that Elijah's mantle had fallen from the chariot. He picked it up, went back to the Jordan and struck the water with the cloak, as he had seen his master do saying "Where now is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" I think I hear the desperation in Elisha's voice. He did not feel ready to take over the leadership of the people. How many times in your life have you felt like that when faced with a new situation?

How many times have you called out like Elisha did with questions about God's faithfulness?

Questions like: Are you with me Lord? What if I fail to be a good leader, choir member, parent, employee, child? Will you help me Lord?

And even if you have never heard the story of Elisha before, I hope you know enough about the God of Elisha and Elijah, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Paul of Tarsus, to know what will happen! God will be trustworthy. God will do what God has promised. Down through history God always has done.

To finish the Elisha story, when he cried out to God so desperately, the Bible says simply "The water was parted from one side to the other, and Elisha went over."

The answer to Elisha's anguish and doubt was to trust in a God who keeps his promises. And that is our answer to our own anguish and doubt and fear today as well.

We all get glimpses of God's glory along life's way and they are given to us for the purpose of strengthening our faith.

I pray for a double portion of the Spirit of God to help everyone listening today to glimpse the presence of God in some faith- strengthening way this Lent.

Because we all need the assurance that the glory of God is all around us.

Jesus has given us the assurance that he is with us, always, even to the very end. Amen