

## Last Sunday After Epiphany

Today is the Last Sunday after Epiphany. It's a cusp Sunday – which makes it important. We're moving from this season of Epiphany - where we have had one revelation of God after another in the life of Jesus – into the season of Lent, which begins with our celebration of Ash Wednesday in a few days.

Today we're offered one last "revelation" of Jesus. We started Epiphany with the feast celebrating Jesus being revealed as a "Light to the nations" as the magi come from far away parts of the world to recognize and honor Emmanuel, God with Us. They followed the star, the LIGHT, that led them to Jesus. And so, in this last revelation of the Epiphany season, we again have the appearance of great light. "Jesus was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." The other two scripture readings for today carry that same message of light: Elijah is taken up in the whirlwind and fire. And Paul writes to the Corinthians: 'For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

But what really holds our scriptures together today and highlights this transition from Epiphany to Lent is our Collect for the day:

*O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son [which is coming in Holy Week] revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory;*

Before we move into Lent – before we make that journey with Jesus to the crucifixion and resurrection – we have this sight of Jesus transfigured. Why? So that – seeing Jesus in a new light, seeing Jesus revealed again and again, we may be strengthened to bear our cross and be changed into his likeness. We get this glimpse of Jesus on the mountain so that we might be changed into the likeness of Christ. It's as if, like Peter and James and John, we have a new understanding of who Jesus the Christ *is*, - and then we are called to come back down from the mountain and get to the work of *being* that likeness.

In our first reading, we have the story of two great prophets, Elijah – and his understudy, if you will – Elisha. We are told from the outset that Elijah was about to be taken up in the whirlwind by God. And Elisha *knows* this – but is hoping against hope,

perhaps, that he can delay it. He won't leave Elijah. Even when the groups of prophets in the towns they pass through *say* to Elisha, "Hey – you're going to lose your mentor, your master!" Elisha tells them to be quiet. "I know, I know! Just don't talk about it." – until they get to the Jordan – the real *transition*. Then the "company of prophets" stand back and say no more. It is only Elijah and Elisha who cross the Jordan on dry land – calling to mind Moses parting the Red Sea for the Israelites to *cross over* on dry land. It is a sign that something important, something new is happening. Things are about to change. And when Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he leaves him, Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. That is the rightful amount of the inheritance for the eldest son – a double portion. Elisha is asking a lot. But Elijah says that Elisha may *have* that double portion of his spirit – IF – IF he can see Elijah being taken from him. What strikes me here is that I do not think it is a question of whether or not Elisha will be capable of *seeing* – not a question of whether or not his view will be blocked or he will blink at the wrong time. No, I think what is really being said is, "If you can *look* – if you can watch with eyes and ears and heart wide open while I am being taken from you – *then* you will receive that double portion of my spirit."

If we can dare to look...

What has happened to the disciples just before the Transfiguration in Mark's gospel is that Jesus has asked them who people think he is...and they say some think he is Moses or Elijah come again. And then he asks who *they*, the disciples, think he is – and Peter responds that Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one. And then Jesus tells them that he will suffer and die at the hands of the authorities – and Peter argues with him about that. "No, Jesus, that can't be. That's not what is supposed to happen to the Messiah in our version of the story." And then Jesus says that infamous line: "Get behind me, Satan!" And he goes on to say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Only six days later, we have the scene in today's gospel – the transfiguration.

If we hold up these lines from the gospel together with the story of Elijah and Elisha, we can see that when Jesus tells the disciples what is coming for him – that he is going to be taken from them – Peter, at least, responds very much like Elisha did when the groups of prophets told him that God was going to take Elijah from him. "Don't say that! That's not how it should be!"

While Jesus is still with the disciples when the Transfigured vision disappears – he was not physically *taken* from them there on that mountain – I think the Transfiguration was perhaps equally shaking for them. For what Jesus’s foretelling of his death and resurrection – and the vision they have of him linked so clearly to the law and the prophets of their past but radiant with a new light of revelation – what these have done is take away the image they *have* had of Jesus prior to those experiences. Peter and James and John have to let go of the Jesus they knew, in order to see Jesus, the Christ, the Word made Flesh, the Beloved of God – both in the cross *and* transfigured on the mountain.

The connection I see here is that for us to receive – to inherit – to take up the Spirit of Jesus, we – like Elisha – have to be willing not to look away from the cross – not to look away when we are faced with suffering or change that we really do not want. And in *not* looking away, we may find there some incredible *light* that will be enough to carry us through. Even while we grieve the loss of what we have known – as Elisha tore his robe in two in his grief – the promise is that we will receive the outpouring of the Spirit of *our* master – of Christ.

Let me put some of this in concrete terms. In the past year, as a congregation, we have been faced with the loss of celebrating church as we knew it. In the early days, one could hear people saying, “We can still be in church if we take extra precautions.” Or “We’ll certainly be back in church by Easter!” Until we weren’t. But because, even while we grieved what we lost, we were willing to see “church” in new ways, the *Spirit* of Christ – at the heart of the parish – continued and continues.

When someone we love is dying – an even closer parallel to the experience of Elisha – those who are willing to sit and be present – just be present – to the dying itself – and not look away – they find they have received an incredible blessing. The spirit of those we grieve losing remains with us – enlivening us if we let it, so that we can live out the legacy of the ones we have loved and lost.

In our spiritual lives, ways of praying that were always meaningful before someday may not feel so meaningful anymore! The image of God I thought I knew so well 40 years ago is not the way I see God now. And I have no doubt that my understanding of who God is, my sense of who *I* am – the ways I pray - will continue to change – if I am willing not to look away, if I am able to be present – even in the changes and losses.

In all these cases – whether it is change caused by the pandemic, or change in our personal lives, or change in our community life, we are so often like Peter.

“Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

In the midst of change or loss, transition or transfiguration, we just don’t know what to say or do. But in this Gospel, we are also blessedly *told* what to do.

“Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’”

Listen to him. When we don’t know what to do – we should listen.

So that, my friends, is what I am inviting us all to do this Lent. Let us *listen* for Lent. Let that be our practice. Let us not turn away from the whirlwinds in our lives. Let us listen – really listen – to one another, to ourselves, to God. The *Living Compass* booklet is there to help us do that. And listening to the voice of God, we, too, may be slowly changed into his likeness.

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory. *Amen.*

- [2 Kings 2:1-12](#)
- [2 Corinthians 4:3-6](#)
- [Mark 9:2-9](#)
- [Psalm 50:1-6](#)