

Year B, Epiphany Last - Transfiguration  
2 Kings 2:1-12  
Psalm 50:1-6  
2 Corinthians 4:3-6  
Mark 9:2-9

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May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Today is the sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, and that makes it a good day to have a lesson about the church calendar. Potentially there are ten Sundays after the Epiphany, although going that far out doesn't happen very often. If there were ten Sundays after the Epiphany, Easter wouldn't come until the weather was really warm and we were already wearing white shoes and light cotton and feeling guilty about breaking the fashion laws our mothers taught us.

Like the other "green" season, that is, the season after Pentecost, the number of weeks in the season after Epiphany is determined by the date of Easter. If you're a scientific, mathematical sort of person, it might intrigue you to use the "Tables and Rules for Finding the Date of Easter Day," found on pages 880 through 883 in your Book of Common Prayer. You'll see there that Easter Day is always the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21. Since the Prayer book uses four pages to explain the rules, there's obviously more to it than a full moon. Of course, you can skip all that and simply "Google" the "date of Easter day" for whatever year you're searching and it will pop right up.

Whether it's the sixth or the tenth Sunday, the Sunday before Lent begins is always called the "last" Sunday after the Epiphany. And that Sunday is always Transfiguration Sunday, a feast day in our church. Although it's not considered a "principal feast" like Christmas or Easter, it's one of three feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ that take precedence on a Sunday. That means we're obligated to recognize the Transfiguration today regardless of whatever else is going on. The Transfiguration of our Lord is also commemorated on August 6 each year, the anniversary of the date of the dedication of the first church built on Mount Tabor, where the Transfiguration is believed to have taken place. Obviously, the church considers the Transfiguration to be important, a big deal! So we're called to study and learn about it, through the words of the three synoptic Gospels, a different one each year.

The narrative of the Transfiguration story isn't very long in any of the gospels, but these short passages are packed with things for us to think about: the event itself, when Jesus' appearance is changed dramatically; the appearance of Elijah and Moses; Peter's bumbling attempt to memorialize the moment; the voice of God commanding Peter and the others to pay attention; and finally, Jesus' own instruction to keep the matter secret. There's a lot to unpack in these seven verses.

Let's begin by looking back at what has brought us to this point. In the lectionary cycle of scripture that we hear on Sunday mornings, we've passed from the nativity to the epiphany to Jesus' baptism and temptation, to the calling of the disciples, to the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, including his teaching, his miracles of healing and casting out demons—all of that in eight weeks' time. From last week to this week, we skipped eight chapters. This summer, during the ordinary time of the Season after Pentecost, we'll recover many of the stories and parables that are told in those chapters, and they can wait until then. But the events that immediately precede the Transfiguration in Mark's Gospel are important to acknowledge now, because they do shed some light on it.

You'll remember the story found in Mark's Chapter 8, just before today's lesson, in which Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Finally Peter seems to understand what Jesus has been telling him for a long time and answers, "You are the Messiah." Jesus *sternly* orders the disciples not to tell anyone about him, and tells them about the suffering he will undergo. Peter can't accept what he hears and begins to rebuke the Lord; but Jesus comes right back at him, saying "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human

things.” Six days later, according to Mark, Jesus took Peter and James and John up the mountain alone, and there he was transfigured. The voice of God affirms that Jesus is the Son of God, as if to prove to Peter and the others that what Jesus has been telling them is really true. From our post-crucifixion, post-resurrection perspective, we can see that the Transfiguration is not only proof of Jesus’ divine identity, it is also a hinge, a turning point that sets Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. We’ll be following him on that road through the forty days of Lent that begin this Wednesday.

Whenever we hear a lesson from scripture, we are called to explore how it affects the lives we lead as followers of Christ. Today we see that following him is not the only thing we are called to do through the story of the Transfiguration. After telling the disciples that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God, God’s voice says, “listen to him.” They hear the voice, but when they look around there is no one there. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson says Mark is telling us that “If we are to learn how Jesus is Christ and Son,” and “if we are to learn what it means to be “with him” as a disciple, we cannot listen to Peter and these others, who think just as we do. We must look to Jesus alone.”<sup>1</sup> And we must listen to him.

In his classic book, *Principles of Christian Theology*, Dr. John Macquarrie describes transfiguration as a three-part process. The first, of course, is our Lord’s Transfiguration. What should follow, according to Macquarrie, is first the transfiguration of the church, and then the transfiguration of the world. In his opinion, a transfigured church “could become the kingdom and so fulfill itself only by losing itself as the separately existing Church.”<sup>2</sup> Through the process, the world would also become transfigured, with Christ at the center of both. To us that may seem far-fetched, improbable and impossible; yet we know that is God’s hope and dream. We tend to be like Peter, terrified and able to do nothing more than capture the moment—or moments—that change our own lives, rather than using them as a starting point for changing what is around us. Perhaps *we* need bigger hopes and dreams, and the courage to act, even if that means we begin in small and quiet ways.

There’s a story of a Hasidic rabbi who disappeared every Sabbath eve, “to commune with God in the forest”—or so his congregation thought. One Sabbath night the people sent one of their cantors to follow the rabbi and observe the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper into the woods the rabbi went until he came to the small cottage of an old Gentile woman, sick to death and crippled into a painful posture. Once he was there, the rabbi cooked for her and carried her firewood and swept her floor. Then when the chores were finished, he returned immediately to his little house next to the synagogue. Back in the village, the people demanded to know from the cantor who had followed the rabbi, “Did he go up to heaven as we thought?” “Oh, no,” the cantor answered after a thoughtful pause. Our rabbi went much higher than that.”

Hearing that story, we should consider who was transfigured? Was it the rabbi, whose life was undoubtedly changed through his relationship with this woman? Was it the woman herself? Or was it the members of the rabbi’s congregation, who were surprised to learn of his selfless acts? When a human being goes beyond the expected or the usual, we are often caught off guard, dumbfounded by what we’ve seen or heard. That is transfiguration, and when the change in us becomes long lasting, even permanent, we’ll begin to see the transfiguration of the church and the world. We have some folks like that rabbi here at St. Francis, and more than just one or two of them; people who quietly give of themselves in situations that might surprise us. They may not even realize that through their actions they are contributing to the process of transfiguration that John Macquarrie describes, the process that God yearns for, the transfiguration of the church and of the world.

I pray that each of us may be open to see the abundant opportunities to become active participants in the process of transfiguring the church and the world, and that we may have the courage *and* the desire to act on them. *Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Rev. Edition, 1999. Minneapolis, Fortress Press. p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> Macquarrie, John. *Principles of Christian Theology*. Rev. Edition, 1977. London, SCM Press. p. 391.