

Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Transfiguration), Year B
2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9
February 11, 2024; St. Matthew's, Sunbury
The Reverend Dina Carter Ishler, Priest in Charge

*Christ, upon the mountain peak stands alone in glory blazing;
Let us, if we dare to speak, with the saints and angels praise him.
Alleluia! In the name of God- Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

I've been drawn to Peter- the Rock on whom Jesus will build the Church- since long before I was studying scripture and crafting sermons about him. Every year on this threshold Sunday between the end of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent when we hear about the transfiguration of Jesus I find myself reflecting on his role in this story and what it can teach us. Many years ago, my entry point into this story was to think "What a goofy thing to say, Peter- as if heavenly beings could possibly be in need of a shelter built by humans!" It's the kind of awkward thing we blurt out when we're nervous and

uncomfortable and don't know what else to say. We all know what that feels like, don't we?

The next thing I began to wonder about was on a deeper spiritual level, realizing that (like Peter) we all try to put our own experiences of the Divine in nice, neat containers so they aren't too overwhelming- we kind of package them up and not take them out again until we feel ready. The truth is, though, that none of us will ever be fully ready, and I've made it a spiritual practice of mine to resist the temptation to do this- to remain open instead to all the radiance and glory even though it can make us feel intensely vulnerable (or maybe even terrified, as today's Gospel says). One of my favorite commentators on scripture, Karoline Lewis, says it like this: "When we shore up the shelters that protect us from harm we also run the risk of keeping out those things that are very, very good."

And then this year I landed someplace different than any place in this story I have ever been before- just different enough that it really caught my attention. Maybe what Peter is really longing for is to *capture the experience*- to hold onto the feeling that it gives him even if he is uncomfortable, awestruck, and more than a little bit afraid. I'm thinking that Peter, like all of us, is hungry for a glimpse of the transcendent, the holy, the certainty of God's presence- something far beyond our own day-to-day experience that soaks us through and through with awe and wonder- *even if he doesn't know quite what to do with it*. If we pay attention- if we live in such a way that we are always open to moments like these- we too will have the light of the transfigured Christ made known to us in blinding radiance. Like Peter, we will not know what to do or say- we will be more amazed and in awe than full of understanding and explanations- *which is exactly how it should be.*

We long for these things at the same time that our insides are screaming “**This is huge! This is hard! What is going to happen next?**” And so of course we want to put walls around it and shut the door, to safely contain it- even as we know that we really can’t do that. We know that God’s transforming, transfiguring presence cannot be bottled up or controlled and it will burst all reasonable bounds and flood our entire being no matter what we do. And our biggest lesson of all may be to realize that we **NEED** to just *let that happen*- that we need to be fully present to all the bigness and wonder and yes, even the terror. Not to try and wrap our heads around it, which we can’t do no matter how hard we try, not to be scholarly and sane and rational- but to just let it **overcome** us. Then and only then will we ourselves be transfigured as well.

As I spend time every week with our lectionary readings, I listen for something to reach out and grab my attention, maybe just a word, maybe a verse of scripture,

sometimes a question that pulls me in deeper... and this week it was this: *Are we in danger of becoming a people who have lost their sense of awe and wonder even in the most amazing and transformative moments?* Can we afford to let this happen to us? Does it not make us lose something precious we cannot afford to be without if we do- will we not miss all the other places God breaks into our lives with blinding suddenness and knocks us off our feet and when we pick ourselves up and catch our breath we have been somehow changed? I can tell you with absolute certainty that this is how my own discernment journey began and I have never been the same and will never be the same again- my shock and amazement and wonder were all parts of the same experience- but the gifts of this moment are, of course, the treasure of a lifetime and I would not trade these moments for anything.

After all, the apostle Paul says, the light of creation- the light which God first spoke into being to blaze in the empty darkness of a universe without shape or meaning is the very same light that now shines in our hearts. It is this light which we proclaim, “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ,” *and it is in proclaiming it that we shine that light into the darkness and brokenness of our world.* Of course, anything this miraculous, this wonderful is far beyond our human abilities to understand. It is easy to lose our sense of amazement and wonder when we live too much in our heads and not allow the glory of God’s action in this world to fill every part of us and transform us from the inside out. If our truest calling is to come down from the mountaintop and proclaim the glory of Christ that we have seen with our own eyes, to speak light into the places of darkness we will encounter as we journey onwards- we cannot possibly do this with any authenticity if we have not felt it radiate it through every

fiber of our being, made a new creation by being in the presence of the living God.

Some people believe that we have become too jaded, too busy or too tired, to seek out beauty and wonder, to shape the kind of life where we might be more open to God's presence. We have access to a global network of endless information and digital relationships 24/7/365, making us believe we can figure just about anything out on our own. Our lives are packed full and there is so little time and energy left for amazement, for stillness, for connection with God and all of God's abundant creation. It is possible that we are missing our own 'mountaintop experience', dazzling or not, because we are just too busy and too tired to give anything, even God, our full attention. And even when we manage to not miss them, to have something practical or physical to do makes it all feel a little more normal, a little easier and safer. It is so tempting to try and somehow shift our most intimate and

powerful moments with God into a more familiar and comfortable place. The challenge is to stay open to God's invitation, to God's presence, terrifying as that may be, vulnerable as we may feel- to resist creating boundaries for the experience- so that we too may live a transfigured life. To tell and re-tell stories like Peter's helps us remember we too are called to find the sacred in the ordinary by staying open in those "thin places" where God's glory bursts forth in a way that cannot be contained, accepting that those things which can never be fully understood by us as human beings are the ones most deeply known in our souls.

Transfiguration is always scary. Imagining our own reality in deep communion and connection with God's is truly an overwhelming thing. Let it be, my beloveds- when this happens to you let it unfold as it will without giving in to your need to be logical, or to try and be in control. Stay open and aware of where the Light is

guiding you- where you are called to share this Light as you come down off the mountain and travel onwards.

Like Peter and James and John, we too have been witnesses to the glory of Christ and our lives have been changed forever. **Amen.**