

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Transfiguration Sunday, 2 Kings: 2:1-12, Mark 9:2-9
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

We've been reading Mark slowly the past few weeks, staying in the first chapter, but today we leap ahead to chapter nine and the Transfiguration. Transfiguration Sunday marks the culmination of the season of Epiphany. We started this season with the Feast of the Epiphany on January sixth. Only Matthew tells the story of the Epiphany: that is, the wise ones following a star to the Christ child. That story is not in Mark, the Gospel on which we're focusing in 2021.

Today's story is only the second time we hear the voice of God directly in the Gospel of Mark. The first time was at Jesus' baptism, when the heavens were torn apart, a Spirit descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaimed "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." That was before Jesus called his disciples, so Peter and James and John, who were with Jesus in today's Gospel reading, did not hear the voice of God the baptism. They were still fishing.

But today they were overshadowed by a cloud and heard "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

That voice with the vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah fulfills this season of Epiphany for us. On Wednesday Lent begins and we will become more penitential for a season. Today, we celebrate as we wrap up a season of seeking and discerning and revelation. We had to walk through this season to get to this powerful point when Jesus' clothes glow and God speaks directly to the three disciples.

That walking is significant. The editors who put together Sunday readings tied the Old Testament reading to today's Gospel because they believe these readings are thematically linked. Notice that in the Old Testament reading today, Elijah and his disciple Elisha walked a lot: from Gilgal to Bethel to Jericho to the Jordan. They walked over twenty miles together.

Jesus and Peter and James and John also walked or hiked quite a distance to ascend the mountain in today's Gospel. That hike, as well as Elijah and Elisha's hike to the Jordan, is similar to what we've been doing in Epiphany, and what we do in our spiritual journeys.

Peter and James and John saw something amazing, but it didn't happen out of the blue. They had spent eight chapters with Jesus in Mark before the Transfiguration.

Elisha refused to leave Elijah three times and walked twenty miles before he saw the chariots of fire.

The three wise men followed a star and asked directions for an evil king before they found the Christ child and bestowed upon him their gifts.

In this season of Epiphany, remember that while epiphanies may appear to strike us out of the blue, they usually come because we have been preparing in some way. Trying to walk with Christ. Trying to follow the way.

Have you experienced any epiphanies in this season of Epiphany? Any revelations? Any culminating celebrations?

I feel a little guilty talking about long spiritual hikes at a time when we have all been on an eleven-month hike fighting this pandemic. Talk about a long journey! The health care workers among us are fighting directly on the front lines battling disease. Others are fighting to keep our businesses going. Some are fighting to keep sanity while spending more time with their immediate household and less time with friends and relatives who don't live with them.

I was relieved and grateful to receive the first vaccine and should receive the second in about a week. I went to my oncologist's office last week and told her that as soon as I get that second vaccine I want to go to The Little Bookshop and to the new Trader Joe's and to my hair stylist and to see my family in Arizona and back to the gym. She told me to wait on all of those things until at least two weeks after the shot, except the gym, which she didn't recommend I go back to for even longer.

I keep wondering: when will this pandemic journey culminate in something like the Transfiguration, something like an epiphany? Something like a celebration? What is at the end of this pandemic journey for us?

I bet many of you know the old black and white movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey begins the movie at a time in his life when he is discouraged. We see flashbacks of George's life, and he had many disappointments: not getting to go to college. Not getting to travel the world. Ending up at the same building and loan where his father worked, even though he wanted something different. Clarence, George's guardian angel, is sent at a time when George is in some serious trouble.

Clarence suggests that George gets a chance to see what life would have been like if George had never been born. Turns out a pharmacist would have lost his livelihood and been disgraced without George. Of course, George's beloved children would never have been born without him, and his wife would have ended up a librarian, which for me as a booklover is a flaw in the film because becoming a librarian hardly seems like a negative fate. But, far more seriously: George saved his brother's life when they were children, and without George, that brother would have died, which meant he would not have been able to perform a heroic feat in World War II which saved a bunch of other people. So now, in a world without George, many lost their lives, even though George never considered himself a hero. He thought everyone would have been better off if he had never been born.

Toward the end of the movie, George prayed that he wanted his life back. "Please, let me live again," he prayed. George longed for that same flawed life that had him depressed and discouraged at the beginning of the movie.

I wonder if that is what is at the end of this pandemic for us. So many things have changed and can't ever be the same, but after this past year, many of us just want to live again. We want things that bored us before. I miss going to the gym on weekends. I have always hated the gym—at least, I thought I did. I miss the greeting line. I miss you all passing the peace for too long.

When those things come back, they will be a mountaintop experience for me, even though before they were ordinary life. For me, that shining mountain will be when we are all together our church building, singing at the top of our lungs. Or even if we are singing softly because we want to hear the choir, not ourselves. The shining mountaintop experience to me right now looks a lot like ordinary life one year ago.

The COVID-19 numbers are declining, thanks be to God. In a few weeks we expect to be able to open St. David's again along the same lines as we did in July through December, signing up for small groups of worshippers, wearing masks, not singing. Like Peter and James and John, we will be stumbling along next to Jesus, waiting to reach the top of the mountain when we will be back to whatever normal will look like. For now, our job is to keep walking. In the words of this morning's collect, we hope to be strengthened to bear our cross by beholding the light of Christ's countenance.

On Wednesday we start a season of penitence and fasting, which may seem harder than years past since we have already endured an entire year of fasting from regular life and things we love. But unlike Peter and James and John, who were also the ones who were with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, we know where we are headed. We know that we are walking toward resurrection and life and shining light. We have to keep going.