

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

February 22, 2009

Epiphany Last B 2009

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings on this last Sunday of Epiphany challenge our 21st century minds. What are we to make of these fantastic stories of a chariot and horses of fire descending down from the heavens and apparitions of prophets long dead? Let's face it; we live in a vastly different world from the 9th century BC world of Elijah and Elisha and the 1st century AD world of the author the Gospel of Mark. We live in a world with a cosmology of millions of galaxies with stars being born and dying every day, black holes and various types of physics that don't explain everything. Our authors lived in a world that was like a three decker house – a flat plain of the then known world with Sheol below and heaven above. We live in a culture where when we read or hear something our first question is- Is that true? The authors of Scripture lived in cultures where when they read or heard something their first question was- What does that mean?

I think it might help us to understand where we are on the church calendar and where we are in the narrative of Mark's Gospel. Today is the last Sunday in Epiphany, the period following Christmas. It is a season when we celebrate the coming of the light of Christ into the world and ponder what this means and how we experience it in our lives and culture. On Wednesday, we will have our heads marked with ashes and enter Lent – a 40 day journey with Jesus and his disciples as they walk from their homes in Galilee to Jerusalem and the Cross.

Our story or the Second Book of Kings is about the last day Elijah and his disciple spend together. Elijah knows he is about to leave this life and tells Elisha to stay behind. Faithful to the end, Elijah follows his master through the parted Jordan to the other side.

When Elijah asks what he can give him, Elisha asks for a “double share of the Prophet’s spirit”. He is asking for the inheritance portion of an eldest son. In other words, Elisha asks to be Elijah’s successor as God’s prophet to Israel. Elijah, wisely tells him two things – that it for God alone to give this and for him to wait for the answer. As Elijah departs, Elisha sees and then picks up the Prophets mantel and carries on. He stands at the banks of the Jordan and asks “Where is the God of Israel?” He strikes the Jordan with the cloak of Elijah and the waters part. The company of prophets proclaim, “The Spirit of Elijah rest upon Elisha.”

This story reminded me of the importance of patience, faithfulness and formation as the way to spiritual growth. Elisha took the time to live and travel with his mentor, observing how God was acting in and through him. He was faithful and followed him – even when he was allowed to leave him. His patient discipleship and faith formed his spirituality and permitted him to learn to see how God was acting in the world and made him a fit successor.

But being prepared was not enough to make him a worthy heir of Elijah’s mantel. You will notice in the story that it was Elisha who asked to be the heir of his mentor. It was when he vocalized his heart’s greatest desire and joined desire to worthiness that he was worthy to be the heir to Elijah. Learning to see as Elijah saw was not enough. When he asked for the biggest blessing possible – to be God’s messenger- he was given his heart’s desire. This story reminds me of the importance of asking for God’s blessing.

Today’s gospel lesson is Mark’s version of the Transfiguration. In all three Synoptic Gospels, this account follows Peter’s declaration of faith, Jesus’ first prediction of his death and Jesus’ teaching on the cost of being his disciple. Jesus takes his inner circle – Peter, James and John – up to a mountaintop. Mountaintops in the Bible and many religious cultures are places where God is encountered. Before

the disciples Jesus is not only transformed into radiance but is surrounded by Moses and Elijah, two great prophets of God who also performed acts of power and wonder in God's name. Their faith in God's promises and in Jesus allowed them to see Jesus as He is. Jesus is always more than meets the eye. Their faith allowed them to see Jesus radiating with the energy and light of creation. "This My Son" the Spirit of the Father rests upon the Son.

We always live with a need for greater vision, for greater clarity of God's desire for God's creation. This is true in our individual lives, in our collective lives as a church and as a nation. We need a new vision that will lead us beyond the spiritual desert that finds relief only in mindless consumerism and fear mongering and war-making. Individually and culturally, we are blinded by ideology – the world as we would have it be – and so cannot see beyond that mundane vision into the brilliance of the world as God would have it become.

When I was a child I knew all about dirt; I played in it all the time. I knew what dirt looked like. I knew what dirt smelled like. I knew what dirt felt like. God help me, I knew what dirt tasted like! But somewhere along the way, maybe in seventh grade, my teacher put some dirt under a microscope and I saw a whole new world of dirt. There's more to Jesus than meets the eye!

When I was an old seminarian doing my field work at St. Bartholomew's in New York City, I always loved the beautiful mosaic of the Transfiguration that is found on the ceiling of the apse. I received their most recent newsletter (you never get off churches' mailing lists!) and the rector noted that the vestry minutes show that the mosaic was put in place two weeks before Black Friday and the stock market crash of 1929. That mosaic has allowed people to look through the Depression, WWII, and every catastrophe since, including, 9/11, and see not just the problems, but also the answers.

There is more to Jesus than meets the eye!

We will start Lent and our Lenten disciplines this coming Wednesday. When I was growing up, I was taught in church that Lent was a time for penance for what we are and what we did; it was a time for “giving up” and “doing without”. We all need forgiveness and we all need to learn to practice self-control. But that is only half of the story. We also need to grow in faith and in vision. Individually and collectively we, like Elisha, need not only faithfulness but also to discern our hearts’ greatest desires. Lent is not only time for doing with less but also a time for asking God for more, for asking God for the greatest of blessings: to be able to see our world and ourselves as God would have them become.

The story of the Transfiguration reminds me of another story of a theophany (an encounter with God) – Moses and the burning bush. I wonder how many times Moses passed by that bush before he saw it with new eyes! As people living in an age of quantum physics, perhaps we can appreciate with new wonder the words written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning over 150 years ago:

**Earth’s crammed with heaven
and every common bush
afire with God;
And only he who sees,
Takes off his shoes –
The rest sit round it
And pluck blackberries.**

It is a perfect Anglican expression of faith as we walk with Jesus down the mountain and towards Jerusalem.

Amen.