

# The Last Sunday after Epiphany

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Today being the Last Sunday after Epiphany, we know Lent is upon us. Whenever we hear the word LAST we naturally think of what is coming, and to leave the rest behind. We can't do that, however, in the connection of the mission of the Church. It is both and. This mission of the church, with the underpinning of the glorious restoration of relationship, means keeping Jesus at center, and at the center, as we should also expect to find, is the same work for each of us.

*Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, o Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Back in 1997 the General Convention of the Episcopal Church designated by resolution that the Last Sunday of Epiphany should also be known as "World Mission Sunday" calling on the church at every level to increase awareness of and participation in God's global mission. Back in 1997, The now Bishop of the Diocese of Connecticut, Ian Douglas was a priest deputy to General Convention and the person who authored the resolution that was passed. He says The last Sunday of Epiphany, was chosen as World Mission Sunday because it puts a large exclamation on the entire season, the season of light, that the entire world needs to see and understand that Jesus is the Messiah; HE is the light of the world. And, as further underscoring, on the Last Sunday of Epiphany the Gospel is always read the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. . So the question might be asked: What does the Transfiguration have to do with mission, with God's mission? And is there a connection for us in our awareness between the Mission to the World, and Lent? Didn't the Church think it would have been better earlier in the season instead of when we've definitely got Lent on our minds?

The Collect for today does give us something to work with in that consideration:

*"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."*

Lent can become, then, a wonderful season of self-examination of quantity and quality for the purpose of serving the Lord God in Mission. Where is the glory on you? And where are you going to display it?

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In Bishop Douglas' words, "You should not be surprised to hear that I think the Transfiguration of Jesus has a lot to say about God's mission, specifically: 1) that Jesus embodies and extends God's saving mission in the world begun in the covenants God made with the people of Israel and affirmed in the words and witness of the prophets. 2) that we followers of Jesus, upon discovering and experiencing what God is up to in Jesus the Christ, too often want to institutionalize, or fossilize, the radical good news of the Jesus movement. 3) Yet Jesus invites us, urges us, to go down from our mountain top epiphanies and join God as apostles of God's mission of restoration and reconciliation."

This last comment of the bishop's ties in with the collect, and places World Mission Sunday on the correct Sunday. The last sentence verse of the Gospel leads the way.

Here's what we heard. Jesus goes up on the mountaintop with Peter, James and John to pray. And there Jesus is transfigured in the glory of God and his cloths become dazzling white. And appearing with Jesus are Moses and Elijah. Moses - the one who received the law and led the people of Israel out of bondage in fulfillment of God's covenants with God's treasured people; and Elijah the prophet, the one who called the people of Israel back into right relationship with God. The appearance of Moses and Elijah underscores that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And then if there is any question about who Jesus is and what his mission is, a voice from the cloud makes this unambiguously clear: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Jesus is indeed the son of God, the Messiah. The one who has come to restore all people to unity with God and each other as the Christ.

This is the intermediary prophesied in the Old Testament, who must come to usher ALL people into the Kingdom of God if they will follow. The Lord cried out through the prophet Isaiah, Where is just one who will stand in between? The ONE is coming said the prophet, even for that moment in his life prophesying of his own ministry to the People of Israel, but in the fullest sense, about the Savior, Jesus, whose name itself means that mission. The one who saves. Here is the reconciling and redeeming work put into a synonymous word and illustration, that is, the intermediary, the one who stands in between, the go-between, the middleman.

And this is part of the message of Jesus on the mountaintop. Pay attention. Intermediaries in their own right, and in their calling, Moses and Elijah stand there as witnesses to this transfiguration of God's glory in and on Jesus. Were these two not also transfigured? Yes, now Witnesses and testimony by their presence!

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And the three apostles present, who would understand what it also means to be called to stand in-between retribution and redemption for people of the whole world, even to their death. There is so much of the Cross in the Glory.

And here is a truth, then, of forward motion, as well as of what can be called spiritual physics : the intermediary , ministering in glory, calling for reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, is a minister of God's transformative power, centered, always centered, never to deviate from Jesus Christ.

World Mission Sunday - leading us into Lent - gathers us around the person of Jesus, who is as Pope Paul VI said, "the very first and greatest evangelizer" , who continually sends us forth to proclaim the Gospel of the love of God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the mission, and it is central.

The Church's mission, directed to all men and women of good will, is based on the transformative power of the Gospel. As we enter into life in Jesus Christ, we ourselves are set free from every kind of selfishness, and is a source of creativity in love.

The Church's mission, is not to propose an ethereal ethical teaching. What we are to proclaim is Jesus Christ himself, pointing to the spoken Word which contains the promises and the mercy and the love that speaks first more of what God brings to us despite ourselves.

The Gospel of our Church's mission is a Person -this stand in between -who continually offers himself and constantly invites those who receive him with humble and religious faith to share his life. in Jesus' name, it can be YOU too, pointing to Jesus.

A little more about the intermediary --

Here's a synonym that might help lead us to describe the work of the church in mission: The Middleman.

These days, the middleman is a somewhat pejorative term. But as much as I have also said things we need to do to get RID of this in-between, I don't believe I've ever met him personally. I am quite sure he also has a real name. But from what I gather, just based on advertisements, I am not supposed to have very fond feelings for the middleman. No-good middleman!

But if you've ever heard of two individuals or companies going through a nasty personal war over whom is at fault, or some infringement, or some other matter, you might be aware of another middleman responsible for overseeing what can be seen as arbitration. This middleman is much more appreciated. This middleman overhears the case between the two companies, who would otherwise be unable to express even the barest

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hint of being civil toward each other, toward coming to some sort of an agreement as to how best they can go their separate ways. Without that middleman, the companies would go around and around in circles, only doing more damage and getting nowhere fast. That middleman serves a very noble purpose; those who take on such a career, as St Paul might say, aspire to a noble calling.

Here we turn to the story of Moses. Moses was not the former kind of middleman, but the latter. His role as the go-between – another name for middleman – between God and the people of Israel was not a self-serving one. He was not in it to get his cut, to make a name for himself, or to impress the Lord. In fact, if you recall, Moses at first wanted nothing to do with God's call to represent the Israelites.

However, Moses had grown quite accustomed to THEIR face, and it was not God, but the people of Israel who needed him. In fact, it is difficult to consider the verses from Exodus 34 this morning without recalling why Moses had to make a return trip to Mt. Sinai and back. Let's remember that what is described in the lesson this morning was the SECOND time Moses had gone up the mountain to receive the Lord's Law for his people. The first time down he smashed the tablets because they were already breaking the first commandment. Going back up, how infuriated was the LORD God Yahweh ... FUMING: "'I have seen these people,' the LORD said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation'" (Ex. 32:9,10).

But here is where middleman Moses, Israel's glorious intermediary and great go-between, stepped in to save them from obliteration. And separation. This middleman boldly stepped in and pleaded for his people. Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites. And God relented.

Did Moses convince the Lord to spare the Israelites on the basis of their past performance or a promise of guaranteed future results?

No, the Lord changed his mind because Moses reminded him of his own gracious promises given to his chosen people. This was Moses the faith-filled man. Not the running away coward.

And, just like Moses, Jesus intercedes as well. Jesus, too, serves as middleman, or go-between. But he does so not for a select group of people, as Moses did, but, for all people. "There is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). You already know why we need a mediator to step in on our behalf before God. You know that sin builds an unbreachable barrier between God and men, and that without someone to step in on his behalf, man is doomed. Lent will

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afford us the season of review, and to this purpose, That we may more fully be in the favor of God ourselves, to more fully give ourselves to the work of being middlemen and middlewomen ourselves. So we too can intervene with the judgment of the ages. and introduce Jesus Christ the universal redeemer, go between.

One more indication of Jesus as the greater, the lasting, eternal intermediary middleman can be raised. Why would Moses' shining gradually fade away? Because Moses represented a covenant which also faded away, one based on the law.

In comparison, Jesus' glory was his own. Glory belongs to him because he is the giver of a better promise, one based not on the law, but on grace; based on a guaranteed promise from God the Father.

And because Jesus the middleman was willing to pay the ransom price itself, by himself. it means we've been set free. Completely free. Forever free. Forgiven and free. What radiance.

Now, then, we are free to radiate his glory, to let his light shine through us as we reflect him to everyone. Just like a 12 year old paper boy Danny did.

Danny was 12-years-old. He was delivering papers one day when the man at the door said, "I don't want a paper. I don't need a paper. My wife is dying of cancer." The man slammed the door in Danny's face as Danny said, "Would you like my priest to come over?" Danny told his Rector about what happened, and the priest agreed to go visit the man.

When this priest visited, he explained to the man, "Your paper boy, Danny, told me that your wife has cancer. I'm here to offer my help. I'm an Episcopal pastor." The man at the door looked angry. "I don't know what an Episcopal is and I don't know what a pastor is," he said. He started to slam the door, but before he could, the priest put his business card in the man's hand, saying "Call me if you need me."

Some weeks later the phone at the rectory rang. "We'd like you to come to the home," the man said. "If you are a friend of Danny's, maybe you can help." The woman was dying of cancer. She was hooked up to an oxygen machine. The atmosphere in the house was bleak. "I've never seen the inside of a church," she said, "but I've got nowhere else to turn. Can you help us?"

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The priest had the chance to share the Good News of God's mercy and love out of the Word of God with the couple, and eventually the woman was brought to faith in Christ, and asked for baptism. It was said that the whole room was lit up by the smile on her face once she had prayed with the priest, confessing, and inviting Christ into her life. She knew her Savior. How did this all happen? Because a little boy named Danny made the most of a simple opportunity to let his light shine. Now, dear friends, what will God do through you, as you let the splendid light of our glorious go-between, Jesus, emanate for others to see?

Today is a wonderful day to consider your radiant mission for Jesus, in the Name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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