

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

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When we look at the Mission of the Church as the disciples looked at the Transfiguration of Jesus we find a very powerful and dynamic model for doing mission and with whom: not a photograph, but a window.

Let the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This year, 2018, we have now come to the end of the Sundays and weeks after Epiphany, an end that because Easter is a little earlier, leaves about 3 Epiphany Sundays left on base. I figured now that football is done, I have license to make use of a baseball term. By the way, I have always appreciated a baseball team named The "Padres" (since I am one). May they rise from Glory to Glory and be transfigured into shining victory.

Ahem. Anyway, this Sunday before Lent is has its own name and focus in the Christian calendar, which is The Last Sunday after Epiphany. If this season were NOT coming to an end it would be the Sixth Sunday. And the Gospel lesson chosen years and years ago to always tell on this day is the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the Mount. This year, year B, we hear it from the Gospel of Mark. As well, the Episcopal Church also celebrates this day as World Mission Sunday, helping us to keep the Kingdom Mission in mind as we preach about Jesus' mission that we also carry.

Think about this with me. There are times in our lives when we look around and wonder, "Is this all there is?" Sometimes it's just a passing question, other times it's for a season. We look at our life, our circumstances, and we want more. There is a restlessness, a searching, and longing for something else. When it happens, you can call a mid-life crisis this kind of restlessness. In any case, It can make us do crazy things – this searching and seeking. We get a new job, a new car, a new relationship. Maybe we take up a new hobby, go on a trip, or work extra hours. But, really, not much changes.

February 11, 2018

“Really,” though, it is not about the circumstances of life. It’s about us. The restlessness, the desire for something more, generally means that we have been living life at the shallow end of the pool. Or just suddenly woke up out of our myopic life and work styles, and discovered we’ve treated Life and relationships as superficial. We have been skimming across the surface. In some ways life at the surface is easier, more efficient, encouraged and rewarded by much of the world today. It fails, however, to see and experience larger and more profound sources of life and light that might just make us wiser and more mature.

With only Life “on the surface” we will keep on only judging the circumstances. We look at our circumstances as a picture. If it is pretty, pleasing, and shows us what we want to see then God is good and life is as it should be. When we don’t see what we want then we often look for a new picture. The restless searching, the longing for more, the desire for meaning are not, however, usually answered by changed circumstances. The answer is found in depth, intimacy, and the vulnerability of seeing beyond ourselves, which might even simply mean having a glance at things that we really just feared to believe in, because they seemed too fulfilling, too good to be true.

A West Texas Episcopal priest, Fr. Mike Marsh, said it eloquently, “We do not need to see new things. We need to see the same old things with new eyes. We do not need to hear a different voice. We need to hear the same old voice with different ears. We do not need to escape the circumstances of our life. We need to be more fully present to those circumstances. When this happens life is no longer lived at the surface. These are the transfigured moments, moments when the picture of our life has become a window into a new world and we come face to face with the glory of God.”

I agree. And, regarding God and his glory, we often try to squeeze God back into that circumstantial thinking, a tragedy of not understanding what Paul said, “Glory to God, whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we could ask for or even imagine.” Most of us, I think, seek God in the circumstances of life. We want God to show up, be present, and do something. This is the God who does. In fact God DOES do something, so don’t let go of that. And this is the God described in Mark’s gospel up to the point of today’s reading. We might think about this as the beginning of the spiritual journey. It

February 11, 2018

is the journey of discovering God in the circumstances. This is what the disciples have been doing.

They have seen, and we have seen with them in our Epiphany Gospel readings, Jesus cast out demons, (lots of them), Jesus heal Peter's mother in law, and Jesus cure the sick of Capernaum by the crowd full. We know He's cleansed the leper and made a withered hand new and strong. Paralytics now walk, the blind see, and thousands are fed. This is the God about whom people talk, the God that gets "likes" and "shares" on Facebook.

At some point we must also read in the story of Jesus, though, that Jesus teaches his disciples to begin to discover the God who is beyond the circumstances. This is the God who is. As Yahweh says about himself, I am who I am, and so Jesus in John's gospel will often answer about his identity saying, "I AM." This is another facet of the spiritual journey. Jesus is leading Peter, James and John, up the mountain to discover the God who is beyond circumstances. Here their pictures of life's circumstances will become windows by which they move into the depths of God's life, God's light, and God's love. There on the mountain they saw Jesus "transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." Then the cloud overshadowed them and the Father's voice spoke of his beloved son. Peter wants to build dwelling places. He wants to frame Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. He wants to preserve it the moment. He wants to take a picture.

As Fr. Marsh says, "Pictures, however, are static. On the Mount of Transfiguration our pictures of life's circumstances become windows through which we step into a new world, a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing, and new way of being." And what, my brothers and sisters is the antithesis of being static? It is being dynamic. That's what happened for Peter, James, and John. Mark tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them. This is not the whole window yet, but we can say that Jesus exhibited, or manifested, the dynamic nature of God, but in his humanity, and even his human clothing. It wasn't that Jesus BECAME something more than he already was. Here I think you could say that their eyes were healed and opened so they could see Jesus as he had always been. As we know already, the voice in the cloud was not new. Their ears were opened and they heard the voice that has never ceased speaking from the beginning. The transfiguration is as much about them as it is Jesus. Whenever our picture of life's circumstances becomes a window into new life

February 11, 2018

we stand gazing INTO a transfigured moment. Ah, we have suddenly become aware of ourselves also IN that transfigured moment. Circumstances haven't changed. We have changed and that seems to change everything.

Now without diminishing the reality of that moment, or trying to spiritualize the moment because we can't wrap our circumstantial heads around it, I'll say that those transfigured moments are all around. Every one of us could tell a story about stepping back from the picture of our life, seeing with new eyes, listening with different ears, and discovering a window that opened into another world and another way of being.

Maybe it was the day you revealed to another person the secret you had carried for years. In telling the secret the picture of your life as one of guilt and shame became an open window through which you stepped. The darkness gave way to light, the chains fell off, and forgiveness overcame sin. The picture of burden had met the window of God's tangible presence, and it was filled with the mystery of life, and hope, and rising. If you are a parent, think about the day you held your child for the very first time. Yes, it was a picture of a newborn but it was also a window through which you stepped and were forever changed. You experienced a new vocation as a parent. You became a part of the mystery of creation. The Lord's glory surely shone as much in your hands that day, perhaps not dazzling white, which might have irritated your newborn, but in a way as it did on the mount of transfiguration 2000 years ago. Or in that same light, perhaps it was the moment when, sharing your faith in what you thought was a most imperfect way, the person you were talking to let you know that because of what you said, they had become a believer, a new child of God. And you saw God's dynamic grace at work.

We often want to go back to those transfigured moments. We are tempted to build dwellings places for those moments. Booths, dwelling places, will only keep us in the past. To the extent we cling to the past we close ourselves to the future God offers. So Jesus, Peter, James, and John came back down the mountain. They could not stay there but neither did they leave the mountain. But now they hear Jesus tell them that were not to talk about what they saw. What were they to do with such an enormously profound and life-changing experience? They took it with them. It is what would carry them through ministry with Jesus, and then through the passion and crucifixion to the resurrection. And even beyond, my friends, it is what would fuel, along with

February 11, 2018

the power of the Holy Spirit on the feast of Pentecost, their own mission in Christ. Although they were allowed to talk about it after Jesus resurrection, that would not stop them from proclaiming that God is not a picture from afar, but God was offering a living window through which to step, to believe, and be met by being in Communion with the living God.

Just like with Jesus and us, our Transfigured moments change us, sustain us, prepare us, encourage us, and guide us into the future regardless of the circumstances we face. They show us who we are. We are the transfigured people of God. These moments also can help us see where and with whom and to what extent we carry on Christ's mission to a world. A world that perhaps has never even considered a picture of God, much less a window to him. Or to those who need a renewing word from your transfigured faith. A world that waits desperately to be told there is more to life than this side of it. Open your eyes and see yourself being Christ's ambassadors to with God's help transfigure a world with the Light of Christ. Open your ears and hear to whom and where God would have you bear his transfiguring voice from his word. Open your heart and become yourself a transfigured life for Jesus' sake, and in Jesus' name.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.