

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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Well, we have made it. We have made it through a long season after the Epiphany- about as long as it could possibly be with Easter falling so late this year. Since the feast of the Epiphany in early January, We have journeyed through story after story of God's revealing God's self in moments like the three kings bringing their gifts to the young Jesus, John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan, Jesus performing his first miracle at the wedding at Cana, the aged Simeon and Anna seeing Jesus at the temple where he was presented by his parents, and now we arrive on what could be called a threshold Sunday. We get one more story of revelation this morning, just before we journey onward into another season, this time the season of Lent. And every year on this threshold Sunday, when we bid farewell to the season after the Epiphany and look ahead to Lent, we get the story of the Transfiguration.

Now at first glance, this story of the Transfiguration can be quite puzzling. And while we don't have time to crack open every detail of the story, there are some important things we can glean from this significant event in the life of Jesus. To give some context to this account of the Transfiguration of Jesus, we can look at a timeline of Jesus's life and ministry to see what happened before and after this event. The Transfiguration occurred about two and a half years into Jesus's three-year ministry (so, toward the end). And right after the Transfiguration, we are told in a different Gospel, Luke's version, that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. In other words, after he was transfigured here, he knew his time on earth doing the work he had been given to do was drawing to a close. In about forty days, Jesus would be handed over to Pilate, and so would begin his Passion.

And so, Jesus had a shift in focus- from doing the work he had been doing- miracles, preaching, teaching- to preparing for the end.

So, with that timeline and context in mind, let's break down this account of the Transfiguration. In the Old Testament reading for today, we get another account of transfiguration of sorts- this time with Moses. Moses has gone up a mountain to receive the Covenant between God and God's people, and when he returns from this important task, his face is gleaming with the light of God's presence. Having been so close to the Divine Presence of God, Moses's face is literally emblazoned with the light and glory of God. And we are told that this light was so powerful that he had to cover his face with a veil. Similarly, Jesus went up a mountain and encountered God through prayer, and he was actually transfigured.

His figure literally transformed. With both Moses and Jesus, their encounters with God left them transformed. But these aren't the only stories of transformation we hear about in scripture. We know that Jacob wrestled with God, and his life was forever changed. After glimpsing God in dream, God changed Jacob's name to Israel and changed his whole identity. We hear stories in the Gospels of countless people who encountered God in the person of Jesus and were healed and restored to wholeness. And our own patron, St. Paul, was blinded by the light of God before his life was changed and he was called to spread the Christian faith.

The short of it is that one is not left unchanged after an encounter with God. In fact, the whole point of the Christian journey is that we are transfigured, we are transformed more and more into the image of God. We hear this echoed in the epistle reading for today when Paul writes in his second letter to the Corinthians, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another...” Rev. Patricia, too, referenced this idea in her forum last week on discernment. She included a quote by The Rev. John Keenan, who said, “Jesus was much more interested in a conversion of consciousness than in imparting information [...]. We all have to go through a conversion of consciousness - a recognition that what we think we know is often our own images and fabrications, and those things have to go.” Transfiguration is not just for Jesus and Moses, but it is for us.

In his transfiguration, Jesus not only reveals himself to us as God incarnate, but he also shows us a model of the Christian faith. He holds a mirror up to us and says, “This here, what happened to me, happens to you when you approach and engage with God. God will leave your life changed.”

Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber underlined this herself in a recent sermon that struck me. In addressing the people in the pews, she said, “Because, honestly, maybe God isn’t interested in making you a better person. Maybe God is interested in making you a new person. Because being better people – being good-er [...] is something we can do on our own. But to become new people we need God. To become new people, we need a God who daily drowns our old dying selves in the watery grave of baptism and raises us to new life.

To be new people we need a God who offers us a way where there is no way.” You see, I think we get so hung up on coming to church and following the rules and being our best selves- we get so wrapped up in being “good-er”, as Nadia put it, that we miss the real hope of our faith. And that is that the Christian journey is not only about being our best selves, but it is about handing ourselves over to God to change us, to transform us. This story of the Transfiguration shows us what is possible when we encounter and engage with God- we experience freedom as we break free from the cycle of looking at our faith as a self-help book and rather enter into our faith as a transformative process.

And this transformation, transfiguration process is not only an end, but also a means. You see, after Jesus was transfigured, after that intimate encounter he had with God on the mountain, like Moses and Jacob and Paul, he, too, was left changed. Knowing what might lie before him in Jerusalem, with this experience, he was now prepared and ready. His transfiguration was a reminder to himself of who he was in God, and with this reminder, he could enter Jerusalem, the last chapter of his ministry, with courage and steadfast faith in the love of God ready to face whatever was to come.

On this threshold Sunday, before Lent begins, we, too, can encounter God and receive strength for our own journey ahead. Lent calls us into a transformative encounter with God. Will we allow ourselves to be transfigured more and more into the image of God?