

The Last Sunday after Epiphany, 19 February 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

Here we are at the last Sunday after the Epiphany, our last Sunday for Alleluias until the Easter Vigil, the end of our celebration of Jesus coming among us and showing us how to be truly human, to live as we were created to live.

It is a culmination of all the celebrations: Christmas and Epiphany and the presentation in the Temple and the Baptism and the calling of the disciples and the healings and the teachings – so much celebration, so much to think about and hold in our hearts.

It culminates today on a mountain top, in a moment experienced by just a few people at the time, but shared again and again over the centuries, to bring millions of others into the experience. Because Transfiguration is an experience. It is the quintessential moment of 'it is in the eye of the beholder'. We are invited to be beholders, to join Peter and James and John on the mountain today, the mountain overlooking Lent and the long road to the crucifixion, a wonderful and frightening place to be.

Transfiguration is a word that speaks of appearance, of what we see. When we say that something or someone is 'transfigured', we are saying that their appearance has changed, that we see them differently, nearly always with more beauty. It is about our perception. In this case we are invited to join those three former fishermen in seeing Jesus in his glory, to see the divine-human reality under all the dust. Jesus is not different than he was the moment or the day before. But what we see is different.

This was clearly regarded as a very important moment among the early followers. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each describe the experience in some detail in their gospels. And as we heard in the Epistle reading, in the early sharing of the Gospel, Peter claimed authority based on being an eyewitness. "We saw it for ourselves!" "We are not making this up – we have seen with our own eyes."

So we are invited up the mountain to share that experience of seeing for ourselves who Jesus truly was and is.

What did Peter and James and John see? It was not just unnaturally clean clothes and a shining face; it was divinity in human form; it was perfect humanity; it was love made flesh – and this in the context of all the revelation that had gone before.

The presence of Moses and Elijah is symbolic in a most direct way. It was (and is) common to use the phrase 'all the Law and the Prophets', as the sum of God's communication with the People of God. 'The Law' refers to the five books of Moses, the revelation about creation and human relationship with God, and the calling of Israel, and their bondage and liberation, and how they are to live as people of God. All of that is the Law in this sense and Moses is its embodiment. And so here is Moses in person, come from the depths of time to witness that all that finds its fulfillment in Jesus, the dusty itinerant preacher from Galilee, who is so much more than he appears to be.

'The Prophets' refers to that section of Torah built of divine conversations with God's people mediated through a whole variety of individuals, first and foremost among them, the one whose return is anticipated each Passover, is Elijah. So Peter and James and John see the glory of Jesus under all the dust of the road and see the testimony of all their sacred tradition to this revelation. Everything that has gone before, not just in their own lives, but in all human history, leads to this moment.

And as if that were not enough, the voice from the cloud comes again, as it did at Jesus baptism back at the beginning of this season of revelations: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" The first time marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry; now he is coming to its culmination. So Jesus and his closest disciples and all of us are reminded in this glimpse through the dust and grime of ordinary life of what is truly real, what really matters. Jesus is put in context so that he will remember who he is and what he needs to do – and that we will accept what he is and does for us.

It is totally understandable that Peter would be tempted to stay on the mountain and hang out in this peak moment of glory. We have all felt that way at some time, the desire to hang on to a moment when

everything feels right. But we see in the story that the point of such moments is to give us the strength to go ahead into the challenges of life, stronger and more confident – not to stay and hug the revelation to ourselves, but to go back out into the world, knowing we are not alone, to go out and bless the world, to go out and love the world as God loves it.

This is not easy. This means going to Jerusalem, the center of political power, violence, and corruption. It means confronting them publicly. It means crucifixion, the ultimate offering of God's love for all people. The clear seeing of the transfigurations on the mountain top gives the strength and courage to confront the conflict and danger to come, because we are not in the struggle alone. At this point the disciples are not invited to go into all the world to tell everyone, as they will be after the resurrection, because they are still learning; they do not yet fully understand what they have seen. They are to hold what they have seen in their hearts for strength as they follow Jesus into the final days of his earthly ministry. They will come to understand what they have seen on the mountaintop after the resurrection and then it will be time to tell the story to other people and put it in the context of telling Jesus' whole story.

Once we have experienced the whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, then we are able to share the story of the Transfiguration in that context. The revelation of transfiguration, the clear perception of who Jesus is, in relation to the Law and the Prophets, in relation to God, in relation to all creation, is not merely a gift giving courage and clarity for those who experience it. It is a gift they are given in order to share it with others when it is needed. Our own experiences of such revelations enable us to live more confidently and lovingly in the world, but also give us something to share with other people who may be struggling. We hold such moments in our hearts but we do not hide them. They are meant to shine through us as Jesus' face shone that day, so that we can be the window through which people can glimpse the face of God.

However they happen for us – whether on a mountain top like this one, or at the bedside of a dying friend, or at the birth of a baby or in deep meditation – however they happen, such experiences are meant to give us courage to live as Jesus shows us how to live, in courage and service and love, and to share what has been shown to us by how we live, as the beloved of God blessing the world.

It is also important that Peter, James, and John had this experience together, so that they could talk about it and come to understand it together. Our calling is always into community, into sharing the life and love we are given. We are God's beloved and God's blessing for the world.

Transfiguration gives us a final high moment of beauty and promise before Jesus and his band head to Jerusalem and we head into the wilderness time of Lent, when we may confront our own demons, our own worries, our own dangers. We have the revelation to sustain us and we have the companionship of one another to encourage us.

When we come together on Wednesday, you will hear the traditional words, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." – our time-honored affirmation of our creaturehood. We are dependent creatures, not in charge of the universe – but we are creatures of a loving creator who never forgets or abandons us. The sign of the cross on our foreheads is an echo of the sign of the cross at baptism made with the words: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

So when you hear, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return," hear also "Remember that you are marked as Christ's own forever." Amen. Alleluia!

This week's handout:

A Prayer for Transfiguration Sunday by the Rev'd Dr. William Loader

Let's go up the mountain.

Let's go up to the place where the land meets the sky

where the earth touches the heavens,

to the place of meeting,

to the place of mists,

to the place of voices and conversations,

to the place of listening.

O God,

We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
the months of ministry transfigured to a beam of light,
the light of the world, your light.
May your light shine upon us.

We open our eyes and we see Moses and Elijah,
your word restoring us, showing us the way,
telling a story,
your story, his story, our story.
May your word speak to us.

We open our eyes and we see mist,
the cloud of your presence
which assures us of all we do not know
and that we do not need to fear that.
Teach us to trust.

We open our eyes and we see Peter's constructions,
his best plans, our best plans,
our missing the point,
our missing the way.
Forgive our foolishness and sin

We open our eyes and we see Jesus,
not casting us off,
but leading us down, leading us out –
to ministry, to people.
Your love endures forever.

We open our ears and we hear your voice,
'This is my beloved Son, listen to him!'
And we give you thanks. Amen. Alleluia!