

*Last Epiphany*  
*February 14, 2010*

*St. Margaret's*  
*Annapolis*

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Where to begin? First, it is so, so good to be back in church. It has felt like ages, not just a week. Meanwhile, if you're like Bill and me, you've been snowed in and getting more than a little stir crazy!

We may have missed a Sunday gathering, but the calendar waits for no one. As the week has unfolded, snowbound or not, special dates are marching along. Yesterday, the 13<sup>th</sup>, was the feast day of Absalom Jones, the first African-American priest in the Episcopal Church. It's fitting that his feast day falls in Black History Month.

Today is Valentine's Day. Tomorrow is Presidents Day. Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday, which means of course, that Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. [Oh, yes – and the Winter Olympics have opened in Vancouver. Too bad they don't have our snow!]

We may have had to cancel services last Sunday, but the calendar waits for no one.

Today, in addition to being Valentine's Day, is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. On this occasion, the Old Testament lesson is often the story of Moses on Mount Sinai, and the gospel is always the story of the Transfiguration.

The Transfiguration is the perfect ending for the season of Epiphany, which if you remember back, began with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan; each story including an announcement from above that this Jesus is the beloved one of God.

These kinds of events in which God is revealed are called *theophanies* or *epiphanies*. We're prone to using the word "epiphany" to mean a personal insight; an "ah, ha" moment. But it's not about us; it's about the glory of God being revealed.

In today's gospel, Jesus has taken his inner circle of disciples up to a mountain to pray. Luke gives his version all the glorified characteristics of the Old Testament story of Moses; the bright light (a symbol of the divine presence), the shining appearances, the cloud of glory (in Hebrew, the Shikannah).

Then Jesus is joined by Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, to bear witness to the ascendancy of Jesus when the voice from the cloud proclaims, "This is my son... listen to him."

The word "transfiguration" comes from the Latin translation of the Greek word used here, which is *metamorphosis*. Webster's describes metamorphosis as "a change of physical form, structure, or substance especially by supernatural means; a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstance."

A change... a striking alteration... that's something I have witnessed firsthand. For several years, I had the privilege of working with young men and women who were exploring the idea of a vocation in the priesthood in a program we called DYVE: Discerning Young Vocations Experience. In fact, it's the program in which I first met Stewart.

This particular year – this was a couple of years after Stewart's group – we had six participants and three leaders, including myself. It was a process in which these young people take part in a process of self-reflection... with a little help from us leaders. For seven or eight months, we would meet once a month for a Friday night and all day Saturday during which we encouraged them to look at themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, their motives and personalities, their hopes and fears.

For the sake of privacy and confidentiality, I will use a fictitious name to describe this particular young man. I'll call him "John." Sometime early in the process, he admitted that he'd just gotten a DUI. He was defensive and defiant. "It's a stupid law," he explained. He went on to act as if he were the victim of injustice.

And then, very quietly, very gently, one of the other leaders said, "My sister was killed by a drunk driver." And everything changes. Now it was personal. Real. No longer abstract.

Two things happened in that moment. One was that two people, two very different people did the hard work of listening to and hearing each other. The other thing that happened, almost imperceptibly, was that John took a step onto another path.

A couple of months later at one of our subsequent meetings, he told us about going to court... about pleading guilty... about knowing that he was lucky – blessed – to not have killed himself or someone else. Losing his license has started like being a leper and become an experience of learning to accept help from friends, and about humility and simplicity.

In other words: he was undergoing a metamorphosis. Through the grace of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he was being transfigured, transformed. Overnight? No. But, oh so dramatically!

The transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain is on the one hand a theological metaphor: Jesus, the son of God, now and forever supersedes the Law and the Prophets. It is one of the favorite subjects of icons – those highly stylized, elegant paintings of biblical scenes.

Did you know that there are rules governing how such scenes are depicted in icons? There are, and icons of the Transfiguration are required to show that even while in the cloud of glory, Jesus' feet are firmly planted on the ground. I believe that presents us with another kind of metaphor: one that is anything but abstract, one that points to the transformation – the transfiguration if you will – that takes place in Christian community. It takes place when we risk being truly open to each other so that God's spirit can work in and through us. We discover that we love each other, even the most unlikely of us. We discover that we *are* loved – yes, even the most unlikely of us.

And transformation begins.

This is what it means to be a Christian. One can be spiritual, one can be religious, one can be a good person – all alone. But to be Christian means to be in the Body of Christ, in the church, *in community*.

So, as we approach Lent, here is my question: how and where are we in community? The kind of community that has the potential to be transforming? Maybe we're too busy for Sunday School or EFM, choir or the Missions Commission. Maybe we don't like the people in such-n-such a group. Don't need it. Private person. Beyond all that.

So, how are we letting God work in our lives, and using us to work in the lives of others?

The Transfiguration is nothing more than a quasi-historical, abstract event unless we have ears to hear the announcement from above: "This is my son... listen to him." And everything about Jesus calls us into relationship with each other; into community. Our feet firmly planted in this world while the power of God lights us up to reveal God's love!

That's what I call a true Epiphany!

Amen.

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