

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
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Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

I led a seminar years ago on issues around human sexuality...I presented all sides of the argument, pros and cons... and I used Scripture, Tradition and Reason... the three legged stool...which is how the Anglican Church and the Episcopal Church understand authority.... And we would argue, this is not just for one denomination...but that the Church over time, approached authority this way...answered questions, determined doctrine by using scripture, tradition, and reason. The bible is primary. But the tradition is important...how has the church interpreted things over time? And of course, our God given reason...our current experience...must be brought to bear. So I used these things and laid out a spectrum of opinions...on the one hand, on the other hand...

Afterwards someone came up to me and said, "I am more confused now than ever. I just want you to tell me what the truth is."

I completely got what the person was saying. I know everyone is not that way, but many of us like clarity and a high degree of certainty. I know I do a lot of the time.

And this goes beyond just trying to make the right moral and ethical decisions in our lives. It goes to the experience of God itself...how do we know God? How do we experience God? With conviction. With certainty.

In response I would say God is present to us in the Torah, and in the prophets and in the other writings of the Jewish People. We revere also the NT, the record of the first generation or two of believers, of those closest to Jesus. And this Jesus is still present wherever two or three are gathered in his name. So Scripture, worship, Spirit, community...all these things bring God's presence to us.

But still...even with all that...things are not always or even often, very clear. Maybe we do all those things but still just don't feel it, don't experience a strong sense of God's will let alone God's presence. Have you ever prayed, "God please just give me a sign? Do something obvious!"

I have to remind myself that, on the one hand, God's presence is all around us all the time. What I mean is that the world in which we live is a witness to the power and majesty of God who created it. God spoke the world into existence and it is only sustained by God's continual love for it. Paradoxically, the fact that we are here asking the question, "Where is God" is proof that God is here.

But , on the other hand, I know we are looking for special moments within what has become normal and customary. We want to go up the mountain with James and John and see Jesus glow with divine light...we want to have a vision of Jesus with his peers...with Moses the Law Giver and Elijah the Great Prophet. If I could just have THAT experience, or one like it, then I'd have all I need to have some certainty.

But...wait a minute. Look at the biblical record. That is just not how things work. Jesus' disciples saw a lot of extraordinary things when they were traveling with him...and yet, they still were very confused about exactly who Jesus was and they were completely at a loss to explain why the Lord's messiah would have to die. It was only through the lens of resurrection that they came to understand what had

happened. With 20/20 hindsight they understood. But we live in the present, always.

So things happen...sometimes extraordinary things. But we still have to do our best to figure out what it means...and sometimes...we just get it wrong.

So...let me go on a tangent here...and give you a non-biblical example. Recently I was able to visit First Landing State Park. This is down near Virginia Beach and it is where the Jamestown settlers landed prior to moving up river. At the visitor's center I learned some about the history. Turns out that Powhatan, the powerful native American and the leader of a tribal coalition of about 20,000 people..turns out Powhatan had this priest who proclaimed a prophecy. This was a few years before the arrival of the English. The prophecy.... "from the east a nation would arise that would end his empire."

In response, Powhatan completely wiped out the Chesapeake tribe...who lived immediately to the east, and he figured he had eluded disaster. You know how the story ended. Powhatan was not much worried by the English. His experience of them was that they either died or moved on, regardless, Powhatan was happy to have iron tools and weapons in the meantime. So there you go. Even when we get these signs, but we still have to figure things out.

Here is what I want to leave you with. God reaches out to us in many ways. By the Holy Spirit. Through Scripture. In worship. In relationships with each other. God even reaches out to us in extraordinary ways sometimes...where mundane reality is transfigured.

But nowhere does God take away our free will. Genesis tells us that we are made in the image of God. Part of what that means is that we are free agents. Free to see or not to see. Free to hear or not to hear. Free to choose. Free to believe or not believe. Free to struggle and to decide. The good news is that God trusts you that much!

Literally as I was working on this sermon, I got an e-mail from a friend with an inspirational message. It said, "When God doesn't solve our problems, (it is because) God has faith in our abilities." God loves you enough, that he takes the

training wheels off the bike, and pushes you out there to ride, wobbly though you might be.

God trusts you enough to believe that you can live boldly and not by sight, but by faith. As the magnificent passage in Hebrews has it, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Or as St. Paul wrote: “what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (II Co 4:18)

In the weeks after the Epiphany, we have heard a series of traditional stories, each of which reveals Jesus to us. That is what Epiphany means, manifestation, revelation. Toward the beginning of this season we always hear the story of Jesus’ baptism, which emphasizes his humanity...and his solidarity with us.

And today on the last Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear the story of the Transfiguration...that tantalizing glimpse, that vision of Jesus, where he shines with divine light and where he is seen with his peers...Moses the Law Giver and Elijah, the Great Prophet.

We are given this vision just prior to plunging into the darkness of Lent, a time of repentance. Lent is a chance to once again, give all our love to God, who has given all his love to us in Jesus. We have the chance to try once again, not in despair, but with gratitude for the opportunity...we have the chance, once again, to get it right. What more could we ask?

So let this be our prayer... “God our judge and our teacher, let us not waste time when the day is done in guilt or self-reproach. Give us rather the courage to face whatever has been, accept forgiveness, and move on to something better. Amen” (New Zealand Prayer Book)