



ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

Episcopal Church

1309 R Street Lincoln, Nebraska 68508 (402)474-1979 www.stmarks-episcopal.org

The Rev. Sidnie White Crawford
Sermon for The Last Sunday in Epiphany
St. Mark's on the Campus
February 18, 2007

TODAY IS THE LAST SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY, also known as Transfiguration Sunday. The season of Epiphany is all about how Christ is manifested, or made known, to the world. That is what the Greek word *epiphaneia* means: appearance or manifestation. More specifically it means “the visible manifestation of a hidden divinity, either in the form of a personal appearance, or by some deed of power.” Notice that one phrase: the visible manifestation of a hidden divinity. That phrase should be helpful to us as we ponder the lessons for today.

As I think I've admitted before from this pulpit, I am not a mystic, and my spiritual life has only rarely had a mystical component. Most of the time my spirituality is pretty pedestrian. I don't have visions, and I seldom feel that God is speaking to me directly. For me, God speaks through what others say to me, or through events that unfold in a particular way, or in a nagging inner voice that just won't quit. Nothing spectacular. So I've always had trouble imagining what Peter, James, and John experienced on that mountain with Jesus.

However, one day when I was meditating on this passage, an insight came to me: what the three disciples experienced that day on the mountain was what Jesus experienced all the time. That little glimpse of an awesome world beyond the mundane reality of first century Palestine was the world that Jesus lived in all the time. It was like a veil was ripped aside for them, and for a moment they saw reality the way Jesus did. They were in the presence of the divine, which was usually hidden from them, but suddenly was visible. They had experienced *epiphaneia*, an epiphany, and they saw Jesus as he really was, both divine and human, both of this world and not of this world, all at the same time. No wonder Peter

babbled, and all three were terrified. They couldn't wrap their minds around it; they couldn't take it in. I can understand that; I wouldn't be able to take it in either. I'm too human, too earthy, too fleshy, to really understand the divine reality. Maybe that is why it is normally hidden from us; God understands that it is too much for us to take.

That care for human frailty is evident in the Old Testament lesson, too. Moses has gone up Mount Sinai, to communicate with God, just like Jesus. This resemblance is not an accident, of course; the episode of the Transfiguration is modeled on the episode at Sinai, to reinforce for us the idea that Jesus is the new Moses. In any case, when Moses comes down from the mountain, the skin of his face is "shining." We don't quite know what that means, but it clearly has an unearthly, otherworldly quality to it. It frightens people; Aaron and the others won't even come near Moses. Moses has to put a veil on his face around people; he only takes it off when he enters the cloud that signals God's presence. Remember that cloud; we'll see it again.

Paul uses the image of the veil as well, although in a metaphoric way. He talks about the veil as a kind of barrier that prevents us from truly understanding God. And doesn't that resonate with our experience? Moses had to put on a veil to hide God's glory shining in his face because people were afraid; we put a veil over our own minds because we are afraid to know God fully. It's too much for us. Now, I think that Paul gets a little carried away with his metaphor here. He seems to be saying two things that I don't believe are correct. The first is negative; that from the very first, when the Law was given, people didn't understand it, and so it was a failure. I think it helps to remember here that Paul was a Jew, and experienced a radical conversion to Christ. For him as an individual, the Law was a failure, and his encounter with the risen Christ ripped the veil off his eyes, and he experienced the full richness of God as revealed in Christ. But then Paul makes the mistake of universalizing his own experience, and claims that no one can know God through the revelation of Moses. This I think is wrong, just through my own experiences

in the Jewish community, which is full of rich spirituality and a deep sense of God's presence.

His second error is a positive one. He thinks that everyone who accepts Christ as Lord experiences the same reality of God in Christ that he does, all the time. I wish that were true! However, at least in my case, I am much more like Aaron or Peter, backing off after a tiny glimpse, than I am like Paul.

But back to that mountain in Galilee. What do Peter, James, and John experience? The appearance of Jesus' face changes. Does it shine, like Moses'? Or does it change even more drastically? Does the barrier of flesh disappear, and the hidden divinity within flame forth? No wonder they were frightened! Jesus' clothes certainly shine- they are described as "dazzling white," which in first century Palestine was a pretty rare quality for clothes occasionally washed in streams or cisterns.

Not only is Jesus altered before their eyes, but the long-dead figures of Moses and Elijah appear, too. Now Moses is there, we realize, as the prototype of the lawgiver, one who "sees God face-to-face." Why is Elijah there? Elijah, in Jewish thinking, is the prototypical prophet. Moreover, in the Old Testament, Elijah doesn't die; instead, we are told in 2 Kings 2, Elijah was taken up to heaven by God in "chariot of fire and horses of fire," certainly a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity. So here in the gospel the disciples' vision tells us that in Jesus the Law and the Prophets are combined, and God manifests his glory in Jesus. Moses reflected the glory of God in his shining face, and Elijah is the vehicle for God's powerful act, but Jesus is the manifestation of God's glory. And just in case there is any doubt, the cloud that appeared at Sinai reappears here. The disciples enter the cloud, just like Moses, and within that cloud, veiled because it has to be, is the reality of God. Terrified? It's a wonder they didn't die of heart failure right on the spot!

Then a voice speaks, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” The words echo the words God speaks at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Here, however, God addresses the disciples: listen to him! God and Jesus are so at one by this time in his ministry that God doesn’t need to address Jesus; the message now goes to Jesus’ followers. At the end of Luke’s gospel, at the Ascension, which is an epiphany as well, with echoes of Elijah being taken up to heaven, Jesus, not God, addresses the disciples: “You are my witnesses.” So we see that Luke structures his gospel with three epiphanies: the Baptism, the Transfiguration, and the Ascension, and as they progress God and Jesus become more and more closely identified.

But we are not at the Ascension yet; we are back on the ground with Peter, James, and John, wondering if it was all a dream; maybe we imagined the whole thing. That often happens, doesn’t it? We, like Paul, have an experience in which God’s presence is so real to us, so manifest, that we are changed. The veil is ripped from our eyes, and we understand. But time passes, the experience fades, and we begin to think we imagined the whole thing.

But God, knowing human frailty, does not leave us hanging. There is a way in which we can reencounter God, every week, every day, whenever we need to. That is, of course, through the mystery of the Eucharist. Through that bit of bread and sip of wine, Christ’s hidden divinity is made manifest. We are granted an epiphany. How we encounter Christ’s presence in the bread and wine is different for each of us, but that doesn’t matter. Christ is there for us, present to us, in a way that we in our frailty can handle. The veil in front of our eyes slips a little, and we get a glimpse of that shining reality that is so much greater than our earthy, fleshy minds can comprehend. What a blessing.

As we approach the season of Lent, I invite you to make it your discipline and your joy to feast at the Lord’s Table at least once a week. As you encounter the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, may God manifest in Christ gradually remove the veil from your eyes, that you may see that divine reality that Christ invites us all to dwell in. Amen.