

Among You

Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year C – Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 7, 2016

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Every now and then in life, some recognition, some sudden awareness, some... *epiphany*, snaps us awake as if from a murky, foggy daze to be able to see things more clearly, to see in a new way. Most such “epiphanies” are little blessings, slight changes in the way things appear, small opportunities to break from the way things are to discover the way things *might* be: The answer to a vexing problem at work, that comes to us in the shower. The solution to a long-stalled project that we just *know*, as we come awake one morning. The “ahha!” insight into trouble or trial or temptation, that suddenly seems so obvious that we wonder why we hadn’t seen it all along.

Though most of us at one point or another in our lives, kind of wish for some such miracle, very few of us are ever blessed with the sort of earth-moving, paradigm-shifting, life changing event that transforms everything in a single moment. Very few of us experience the kind of epiphany we really mean when we actually *use* the word, “epiphany.” But that’s *exactly* what happened to the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples in this morning’s Gospel lesson.

Jesus takes James, and John and Peter with him to the mountain to pray. They had gone with him to pray before, and always before it had been a quiet time of reflection and preparation, a quiet time for the disciples to catch up on their own prayers, and perhaps get a little rest. But this time it was different. As Jesus prayed, things changed. As Jesus prayed, Jesus *changed*. Jolted as if from a murky, foggy daze, the disciples covered their eyes because of the brilliance of his appearance. But peeking between their fingers, they saw Jesus flanked by Moses and Elijah. Moses, whose face shown with God’s glory when he came down from Mount Sinai with the Law. And Elijah, the prophet whose journey into heaven was so lit by God’s glory that the chariot in which he rode seemed to be on fire. And there was Jesus between them, shining with the very glory of God. As the disciples peeked through their fingers and stumbled for some appropriate way to respond, a voice boomed from heaven, “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!”

When Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain of Transfiguration, they were changed. *All* of them. Jesus knew what had to be done. And the disciples knew it too, because they had seen the glory of God in the face of the Son, the Chosen, the Messiah, the Christ.

I was reminded this week of a story that *I* heard from Charles Duvall, sometime Bishop of the Central Gulf Coast, the story of a famous monastery that had once been the hub of life and spiritual enlightenment for the whole region. It had been full of life and vitality, its cloisters full of devoted monks, a constant stream of visitors seeking spiritual guidance, the work of the community reaching out to the poor and the needy around them. But as the decades passed, the monastery had fallen on hard times, when their spirit and their energy and their life had seemed to dry up. The poor looked elsewhere for help as the monastery had barely what *they* needed to survive. Fewer and fewer pilgrims came to seek guidance they began to know they just wouldn’t find. Young people eventually quit giving themselves to become part of the community, until finally, there were only a handful of elderly monks going about their work, their prayer, their study, and even *then*, with heavy hearts.

The only time their spirit seemed to lift was when the word went out that the rabbi was walking in the woods. You see, in the woods near the monastery, there was a small hut that this rabbi had constructed as a place of retreat, and he came from time to time to fast and pray. And when the monks in the monastery knew he was fasting and praying, they felt supported by his prayer. Then their work and their prayer was at least bearable.

One day, the abbot of the monastery, hearing that the rabbi was walking in the woods, decided to go see him. When the abbot turned the last bend in the path and reached the little hut, there in the doorway stood the rabbi with his arms outstretched to welcome him. Though he had given no notice of his visit, it was as if the rabbi had been standing there waiting for him for some time. The two old men greeted one another, and then went inside and sat at the table where a book of scripture stood open between them. The two men sat there for a long time, praying silently, until the abbot began to weep. He poured out his concern for the monastery and for the spiritual health of the community. Finally, the rabbi said, "You seek a teaching from me, and I have one for you. It is a teaching which I will say to you *once*, and then I will never repeat. When you share this teaching with your community, you also are to say it just once, and then never repeat it. The teaching is this: "The Messiah is among you."

The two men continued to sit together in silence until the sun began to set, but when the abbot rose to bid farewell and thank the rabbi for his hospitality and for his wisdom, his heart was lighter than it had been since he took on the responsibility of leading his community. That evening as the monastery gathered for their prayers, the abbot told the monks what he had learned from the rabbi. He told him, as he had been instructed, that he would share the teaching once, and then they were to talk about it no more. "Listen carefully," he said. "The teaching is this: the Messiah is among you." The brothers looked around, but asked not to let this teaching be a matter of discussion, each of them was left with his own thoughts, his own questions about what it might mean, "the Messiah is among you."

In the days that followed, as they went about their prayer life and their work and their study of scripture, the monks continued to reflect on the teaching, "The Messiah is among you." "The Messiah is among you." "The Messiah is among you." And they wondered, who might it be. "Is Brother John the messiah?" "Is it Father James?" "Is it maybe Sister Mary Elizabeth?" "Am *I* the Messiah?" As days turned into weeks turned into months turned into years, they began to see one another in a whole new light. They began to treat each other in a whole new way. If the Messiah was among them, *each* of them, it seemed, *might* be the messiah. Though the rabbi's teaching was never repeated, a new energy, a new sense of expectation, a new *spirit* was noted by the handful of pilgrims who made their way to the monastery. Soon the word began to spread about the spirit of concern and compassion and expectation could be felt at the monastery.

Before long, the story concludes, pilgrims began to come in greater and greater numbers to experience the blessing of being in this community of faithful people. Before long, young people began to offer themselves in service. Before long, the spirit and the energy and the *life* of that community of believers became a source of life, a source of energy, a source of the Spirit to the whole land. And all because they all believed that the Messiah, the Christ was among them all along.

The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration was unique and will never be repeated. Everything changed in that one brilliant Epiphany. When Jesus and his disciples came down from the mountain of Transfiguration, *they* were changed. All of them. Jesus knew what had to be done. And the disciples knew it too, but not because they had peeked through their fingers to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus. Things changed for the disciples because they *knew* that the Messiah, the Christ, was among them.

I have a teaching for you this morning, my friends. You know me well enough, and I know *myself* well enough, to know that I will not say it only once, and I *hope* you won't keep it to yourself. But I'm saying it this morning, so please listen carefully. Christ is among you. Christ is among you. Christ is among you.