

Walking in the light

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Epiphany 7B / Transfiguration, 19 February 2012

2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50:1-6, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

Today is a liturgical bridge day. It is the bridge between the season of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. Like a bridge it brings together two places or ideas and themes. During Epiphany the question has been, "Who is Jesus?" We began Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus. In that story God declares to Jesus, "You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased". Now, at the end of Epiphany God declares to Jesus and his three followers, Peter, James and John, that, "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him".

The transfiguration of Christ is one of the central events recorded in the gospels and is a story thick with metaphor, symbolism and meaning. If we take a step back in the story we find that his apostles had just recognized Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. He tells them that he must undergo great suffering, be rejected, be killed and then after three days rise again. His followers greet this announcement with indignation. And then, after rebuking them, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John "up to a high mountain"—by tradition Mount Tabor—and was "transfigured before them." The word translated as 'transfigured' is the Greek *metamorphosis*. It meant to be changed in appearance.

It is thought that the transfiguration happened at the time of the *Sukkot*, the Jewish Festival of Booths. This was a celebration and thanksgiving of the forty years the Israelites wandered in the wilderness with Yahweh, the God of Moses, dwelling with his people. The transfiguration then reveals how this dwelling takes place in and through the Messiah, the Son of God in human flesh and how we then live in the presence of God, through Jesus Christ his son.

In the Transfiguration, the apostles see the glory of the Kingdom of God present in the person of Christ. The Orthodox teach that they see this before the crucifixion so that in the resurrection they might know who it is who has suffered for them, and that they may know what it is that God in Christ has prepared for those who love him.

As well as these mind-boggling ideas, the presence of Moses and Elijah is also of great significance for the understanding and celebration of the feast. Moses and Elijah are not only the greatest figures of the Old Testament who now come to worship the Son of God in glory; they are not merely two of the holy men to whom God has revealed himself in the Old Testament. They stand for the Old Testament itself: Moses for the Law and Elijah for the Prophets. And so Christ in the transfiguration story is portrayed as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17).

They also stand for the living and dead, for Moses died, while Elijah was taken alive into heaven. According to scripture and tradition he was to appear again to announce the time of the Messiah. Thus, in appearing with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah show that the Messiah is here, that he is the Son of God to whom the Father himself bears witness and that he is the Lord of all creation, of the Old and New Testaments, of the living and the dead. The Transfiguration of Christ is the fulfilment of all of the theophanies and manifestations of God, a fulfilment made perfect and complete in the person of Christ. The Transfiguration of Christ also reveals to us our ultimate destiny as Christ-followers and the ultimate destiny of all creation, that is, to be transformed and glorified by the light of God, to live in and through God's presence, day by day.

This is all wondrous stuff! In this short story is contained the whole purpose and meaning of creation and the Christian life. There are of course debates about to whether it is literally true. Some have suggested it is a misplaced resurrection account. Others say it is so thick with symbolism and metaphor it has to be a fiction. I am not too interested in those debates. I trust that God's Spirit is working in us as we read and reflect on it, opening us to a truth we are offered. It raises many questions, too many to cover in one small sermon. But I do want to look at one question so we can ground this story in our own experience and lives.

My question is how do we live in the knowledge of God's glory in Christ Jesus? That is, what are the simple steps we can take to enter into, live in, and proclaim the light that Christ brings to our lives and the world.

The first thing to do is to follow the leader. That leader would be Christ Jesus. Every preacher that stands up here should have as their main focus the good news of the Gospel, that is, that Jesus Christ is the image of God and God's glory. (That's straight from the epistle reading by the way, as Paul says that God's light has shone in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in Christ Jesus). Jesus Christ reveals God's light, love, mercy, peace, forgiveness, faithfulness and goodness. We choose to follow Christ because we are confident he has 'it'.

There are, of course, many other paths to explore, other teachers who point to the truth, but at some point disciples of Christ decide that he has the message and he is the message. By following him we come into wholeness, healing and fullness of life. This is what Peter, James and John have sensed in Jesus. They left their nets and other occupations, gave it all up, to follow Christ. Elisha did the same thing with Elijah in our first reading.

In fact, when Elijah told him to stay behind he kept saying, "No, I will not." He kept following and asked for the same spiritual gifts that Elijah had.

And even though Jesus followers were perplexed by his words about suffering and the cross they still followed him up the mountain the next day, down into the valley and into Jerusalem. They made mistakes along the way but still kept following. As we follow Christ, connect with God's presence, his love and light will begin to shine in our lives.

One of the signs of our discipleship will be the love we have for others. Jesus tells his followers in John's gospel that if they are his disciples they will love as he has loved.

Secondly, next thing is to stay with the uncertainty. Light can actually bring confusion and challenge. I have done a little bit of caving in my time. While you are underground in the dark, the dirt beneath you, the roof above, and the walls around you become your whole world. As you navigate your way in the dim light your world shrinks. It is limited but very easy to take in. Then when you come out into the light your world expands in a blaze of light and it is very disorienting. In fact your first impulse is to climb back in the ground.

Beginning to walk in the light of Christ can be like that. It is not all peace and comfort and hot cups of tea. The light can reveal things we would rather not face in the world, in our families and, most confrontingly, in ourselves. The light will reveal our growing edges and that always feels a little or a lot rocky, depending on the growing edge.

Up on that mountain Peter, James and John were very uncertain. I used to think that Peter was a bit dim, he doesn't understand what was going on. I still think that is true (How indeed could he be any different?) but neither he nor the other two left Jesus on that mountain. In fact they were ready to settle in for the night, put up some tents and make the most of it. They stayed with their fear and uncertainty and, in the midst of confusion, trusted in Jesus. They stayed.

Because they stayed with the uncertainty they were available to hear God's assurances. As they are standing there terrified a cloud overshadows them and the voice of God says, "This is my Son the beloved, listen to him". One of the hardest things to do in life is sit with uncertainty. The Christian life can end up posing more questions than answering them as the light of Christ shines ever more into our darkness, the things hidden from our awareness. Yet I have found time and time again that the path does become clear, the confusion lifts and through God's presence and grace I am able to discern the next step. God's light may bring temporary uncertainty and disorientation, but it will eventually lead to eternal hope and faith.

After Jesus and the disciples leave the mountain, they begin the journey to Jerusalem. There they will all be tested. Chaos and darkness will descend. Jesus will be abandoned and rejected, even by those closest to him. The disciples will be at turns excited and terrified. How they thought the world and God operated will be fundamentally challenged when Jesus is raised from the dead speaking words of peace and forgiveness into violence and hatred and political necessity.

This is the journey that the season of Lent, which begins this coming Wednesday, takes us on. Lent is a time of spiritual preparation for the redeeming and life-giving season of Easter. It is a time actively to participate in the work of Christ's light in our lives, when we uncover and disclose our growing edges, when we surrender our lives to the cross so that we may live in fullness and wholeness. I am not sure what your Lenten practices will be this year but if you follow Christ who went before you, if you stay with the uncertainty and listen for God's presence and assurance, then you and I will grow in our faith, we will grow into resurrection and wholeness, and we will find God's peace that passes all understanding. This is the promise of God.