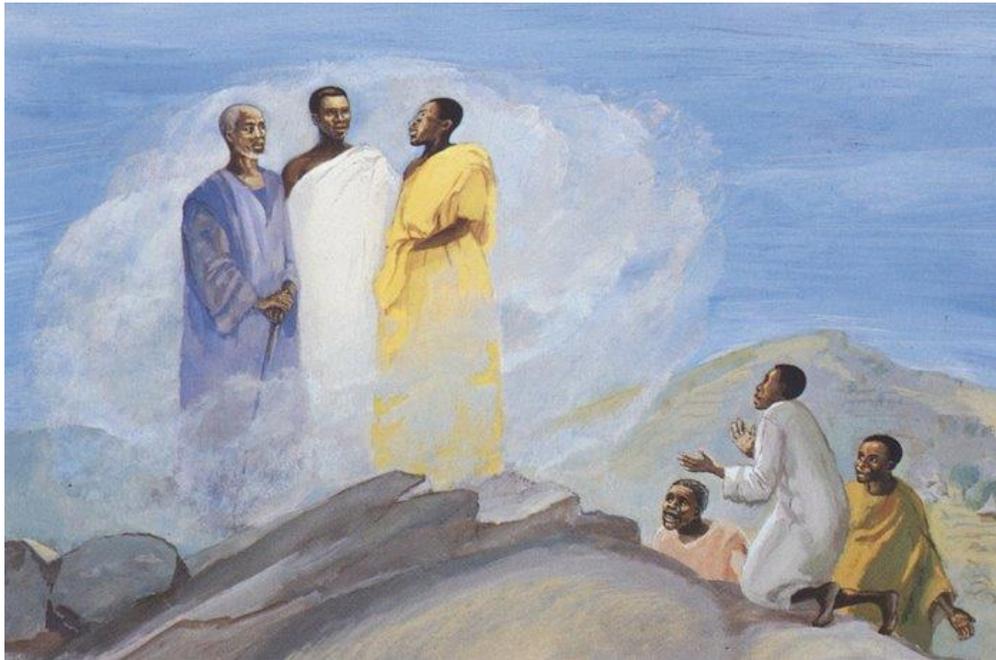


St Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska
Message by Rev. Catherine Amy Kropp
Scripture: 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

Sunday, February 14, 2021
Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Sanctuary



Transfiguration by JESUS MAFA¹

Holy and gracious God, open our hearts to the fullness of this moment and this space. Help us to feel the abundance of your love and bear witness to your presence through Jesus the Christ. Amen.

*Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)*

What an extraordinary moment in the Gospel of Mark. This little moment when God shows up: a 'theophany' as we call it when God is visible or heard in the story of our human journey within the divine mystery. Here, God arrives as the voice from above, much like the earlier theophany in Mark when at the baptism of Jesus God speaks,

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. (Mark 1:11)

In this first one, God is speaking to Jesus directly, but in the one we hear today, God is speaking to us, declaring Jesus to be God's son, and giving us one very clear instruction: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him."

There is something a little disturbing and even provocative about this declaration. God is interrupting human life and human assumptions and human reality.² And among those who are watching, whether they be the prophets Moses and Elijah or the disciples Peter, James and John, or whether they be us who read the story, being spectators or bystanders is not an option. We are *witnesses* to something that breaks through our consciousness, and we glimpse a greater reality and all that this demands.³

I wonder, if a voice came from heaven and said, listen!, would we? It is easy to judge Peter, James and John for being slow; because, well, that is what we are, slow! Slow to see the radiance, slow to see our own connections and connectedness, slow to see the deep relationships, slow to see the fullness of our being; because we are so separated from the love that creates and forms us, binds us, and guides us.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus casts light on the meaning of Epiphany as a season of encounter and anticipation. As Shively Smith writes, our experiences of amazement and revelation are necessary. And the transfiguration story invites us to re-discover our sense of wonder.⁴ Even if we are slow to understand, even though we may not be on a mountain watching Jesus become dazzling white, still we have glimpsed something. Something has *captured* our attention.

As Richard Rohr writes, “We must first allow ourselves to be captured by the goodness, truth, or beauty of something beyond and outside ourselves. Then we universalize from that moment to the goodness, truth, and beauty of the rest of reality, until our realization eventually ricochets back to include ourselves!”⁵ This is sacramental view of reality in which, even in a glimpse, *everything* becomes an epiphany.⁶

Like our annual meeting two weeks ago, here on Zoom, when we shared and celebrated and remembered so much goodness within and among us in the last year. The stories we told! The hope we felt rising up among us! What a surprise it was to witness together a tiny moment of transfiguration, a glimpse of radiance!

We likely all have a list of moments of rising joy, moments when we overcame the illusion of our separateness, during this past year. For me, my list includes the moment in December that I drove onto the church parking lot for the cookie exchange with the members of the St Mary’s Bazaar and witnessed them all greeting one another from a distance and bearing their gifts; or when one of the children laughed so heartily and spontaneously during a rehearsal for the Christmas Pageant on Zoom when a mistake was

made in our script, and we laughed together; or the deep connectedness I felt with the world during the services of hope and healing.

And we are falling into one of these moments *right now*. When something overwhelms our senses and we have to stop what we are doing and pause.

This is indeed a moment of pause in our worship, in our journey, in our collective experience of epiphany.⁷

The music and this *expansive* sense of sanctuary, both physical and deeply felt, transports our hearts into a common space of joy, gratitude, and wonder.

We experience awe as we see the sanctuary and hear the amazing live music. Most of us haven't seen the physical sanctuary of our church for eleven months. For those who have joined our community in the last year, here it is for the first time among us. This is where we say, all are welcome! As we take in the view from online, I feel like we are floating above the sanctuary, looking down. And we are literally seeing the sanctuary from new angles through the new cameras.

As so we find ourselves now at the end of Epiphany and on the eve of Lent, and on this Sunday we call Transfiguration Sunday, remembering the story about the brilliance on a mountain top through and around Jesus.

And still we feel out of place, out of sync, with a world that in the past year has been moving too fast, with too much destruction and separation and discord and violence.

And our bodies remember this time last year. There is, I think, a profound collective memory surfacing, an unease, knowing that we've been here before. We are bracing for the season of Lent this year.

Mardi Gras feels a little unnatural. It usually marks a celebration just *before* a period of fasting, but *we've already been* fasting. This is a time when we usually prepare for a season of reflection, but we've *already been* in a period of deep reflection. We have been so very serious for so long.

These are in-between times. We are in a kind of suspension. We are seeing even the familiar things, the beloved things, in new and extraordinary ways. Who would have

thought that we would be happy to see our sanctuary from up high, on the ceiling, a little mountain-top experience right inside the familiar!

And in the first reading today, another dramatic moment, a threshold moment between heaven and earth, with Elijah passing on his prophetic witness to his apprentice Elisha, we can sense something is ending and what is to come is not yet here.⁸

And so we are a bit like the younger prophet, watching Elijah ascend into heaven, witnessing this profound moment of mystery. Another glimpse of a greater reality, a moment of being transfigured.

Elijah, this prophetic figure, who in a mystical moment doesn't really die in the body, but, rather, is swept up to heaven, bridging the transfiguration stories of the Hebrew and the Christian witness. Elijah, captured as he is by great heavenly forces, leaves us with expectation. We sense a divine anticipation in Elijah, in Jesus, in small moments, and in ourselves.

And we discover together a new and expansive sense of the body of Christ. A glimpse of the transfiguration that we can feel *together*.

As Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury put it, God is not creating something other or apart from human community but "the possibility of unrestricted community" and a shared freedom.⁹

And in this shared freedom, we witness something within us. If we *feel* together, we *are* together. *This* is the sanctuary that never goes away, and that always leads us, forward, back, within and into the world, together. Where we can be transfigured in the little moments of epiphany and transfiguration. When God's love and power through Jesus becomes within us "visible and active."¹⁰

*Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice,
"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7)*

Let us be captured by the goodness that stirs in our hearts. Let us celebrate together with uplifting music and a rising sense of joy, falling together into our physical sanctuary, bringing with us the shared sanctuary that we have discovered in our hearts, gathering around the table, our beloved altar, in new ways, and growing together into the unbounded sanctuary of God's love. Amen.



The Prophet Elijah in a Fiery Chariot by Sébastien Le Clerc¹¹

READINGS

2 Kings 2:1-12

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of prophets who were in Bethel came out to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he said, "Yes, I know; keep silent."

Elijah said to him, "Elisha, stay here; for the Lord has sent me to Jericho." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they came to Jericho. The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" And he answered, "Yes, I know; be silent."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

Mark 9:2-9

Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

¹ JESUS MAFA. *Transfiguration*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48307> [retrieved February 13, 2021]. Original source: <http://www.librairie-emmanuel.fr>. JESUS MAFA is a response to the New Testament readings from the Lectionary by a Christian community in Cameroon, Africa. Each of the readings was selected and adapted to dramatic interpretation by the community members. Photographs of their interpretations were made, and these were then transcribed to paintings.

² “Elijah’s departure indicates Yahweh’s invasive force upon humanity (see Job 38:1). God interrupts life and the natural order, and the text connects the divine sphere with the prophetic tradition as root and foundation for salvation in the history of Israel.” Julián Andrés González Holguín, in Joel B Green. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B, Volume I (p. 585). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

³ “Narratively speaking, this imperative suggests more than practices of passive listening. Here, the voice demands that the very disposition of Jesus’ closest followers evolve from spectators to witnesses, those who listen with the intent to embrace and embody what they hear and observe as most divinely true.” Shively T. J. Smith, in Joel B Green. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B, Volume I (p. 606). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Shively T. J. Smith, in Joel B Green. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B, Volume I (p. 605-606). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Richard Rohr Daily Meditation: “Awe and Joy,” February 11, 2021, Center for Action and Contemplation, cac.org.

⁶ Richard Rohr Daily Meditation: “Awe and Joy,” February 11, 2021, Center for Action and Contemplation, cac.org.

⁷ The reference to “a moment of pause” comes from Shively T. J. Smith who writes, “Transfiguration Sunday embodies the essential meaning and intention of the Epiphany season with its journey of anticipation, encounter, and inquiry. Mark’s transfiguration account appears at the conclusion of Year B’s Epiphany season, preparing believers to enter the Lenten period of reflection by equipping us with a story of manifestation about Jesus as the Christ. Experiences of amazement, wonder, and revelation surface in Mark’s narrative of transfiguration as essential to a robust understanding of Epiphany. Before we can reflect and participate in a period of penitence, Mark’s transfiguration account invites readers to rediscover childlike wonder. It nurtures a moment of pause on the mountain with Jesus and his inner circle (Mark 9:2) to see something we have never seen before and to embrace its possibilities.” Shively T. J. Smith, in Joel B Green. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B, Volume I (p. 605-606). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁸ “...God initiates a transfer of spiritual leadership. One era is ending, but the next has not yet begun, and everyone in the story is occupied by the implications of the succession. Such in-between times give rise to several significant theological themes: the flow of time in relation to the constancy of the eternal, the dealings of infinite Spirit with finite humanity, and the nature of faithful response in the face of the

unknown and the Unknowable.” Wm. Loyd Allen, writing in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration* (p. 1168). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 1st edition (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1999); p. 237.

¹⁰ “Elijah’s relevance in the memory and imagination of his readers helps us see why those who witnessed Jesus of Nazareth usually mistook him for Elijah. It is remarkable that the Old Testament ends with an affirmation that Elijah is a coming, future figure (Mal. 4:5–6). Elijah is expected to “come again” as a harbinger of God’s full rule. Jesus reflects to Christians of all times a similar expectation and an awareness that in him, as in Elijah, someone larger than life will be on the scene as the embodiment of Yahweh’s full power that becomes visible and active. In light of present-day circumstances, many will confess with John the Revelator, “Come, Lord Jesus!”” Julián Andrés González Holguín, in Joel B Green. *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year B, Volume 1 (p. 588). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Le Clerc, Sébastien, 1637-1714. *The Prophet Elijah in a Fiery Chariot*, from *Art in the Christian Tradition*, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=50631> [retrieved February 14, 2021]. Original source: <http://www.mfa.org/>.