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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, February 27, 2022

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Exodus 34:29-35](#)

[2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2](#)

[Luke 9:28-36, \[37-43a\]](#)

[Psalm 99](#)

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Some epiphanies are big ones, mountaintop experiences. Some epiphanies are smaller and more everyday.

One of mine happened eighteen years ago on a pathway in a public garden. It was the summer after Julia and I had started dating, and the relationship was quickly starting to feel special. It was a beautiful day, we were in a beautiful place, and I was falling in love: and as we walked together through the gardens there was a moment Julia turned halfway toward me and gave me a small smile. I don't know what it was about that smile. It was no different from a hundred smiles she's smiled before or since. But in that moment, the world suddenly looked different. It's a moment I've gone back to over and over as I remember the early days of our relationship. The memory of that one smile somehow encapsulates everything else, a symbol of the dawning realization that this was going to be a relationship that would change my life.

I bet you can think of moments in your life that have been like that. Maybe it was the birth of a child, or the death of a parent; maybe it was the first time you dribbled a basketball or picked up a musical instrument. Just about anything might trigger an epiphany, but there's no way to force it. One way or another, there are times in our lives where the veil is pulled away and suddenly, we're blessed to see things from the perspective of a deeper reality. That reality is always there: but we aren't always able to see it as clearly. And so we need epiphanies.

The Greek word "epiphany" means "to shine upon," "to give light to." And for the last nine weeks we have been celebrating the season of the Epiphany, a season of illumination and revelation, when the glory of God is revealed to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. It starts with the light of a star shining above Bethlehem. It continues through the stories of Jesus' baptism, his first miracle, the beginnings of his public ministry. And today this season of light reaches its culmination, where Jesus becomes light itself, face and clothes shining with heavenly glory as his disciples suddenly see him revealed as one with the living God.

It's a preview of the resurrection, when Jesus will again meet them on a mountain in Galilee, filled with the power and glory of risen life. It's also a sequel to the story of Sinai that we heard earlier this morning, when Moses went up on a different mountain to meet God face to face and came back down with his own face shining in glory. Like all good epiphanies, the transfiguration is a moment of special insight into a reality that has always been true. Jesus is the successor to Moses and Elijah, the great figures of Israel's prophetic past. And he's God's special child and chosen one whose words are uniquely worth hearing. All this was true before he and the disciples trudged up the mountain, and it's true after. The only difference is that now his friends have been given new eyes to see it.

Not all epiphanies are positive ones. Maybe you remember the 1990s movie *The Matrix* where an ordinary guy named Neo is offered the choice between a red and blue pill. The blue pill will return him to his everyday life. The red pill will change his life forever by letting him see things the way they really are.

When Neo chooses the red pill, he learns everything he knows is a computer-generated reality created by malevolent machines to keep humans happy and comatose. The real physical world is a post-apocalyptic nightmare where only a few humans are disconnected from the false reality of the Matrix and fighting to free the rest of humankind.

But like all epiphanies, this one changes Neo's view of reality. When he goes back into the Matrix knowing its true nature, it looks just the same—yet different. Little by little, he begins to notice the flaws in its illusory reality. Over time, he discovers that he can control the physical universe of the Matrix using his mind, fighting the false reality on its own terms. Because Neo's been given a glimpse beneath the surface—because he knows how things really are—it changes the way he lives.

It's the same way with the Transfiguration of Jesus. In a brief moment, the disciples—and we with them—get to glimpse reality as it truly is: this human being, Jesus Christ, is the radiant glory of God in the world; as one of the great Epiphany hymns puts it, “God in man made manifest.” Once you get a glimpse of that reality, it changes the way you see the entire world around you, from the beauty of creation to the most ordinary person on the street: this whole universe is shot through with the glory of God in Jesus Christ.

That doesn't change the fact that the world is also a place full of suffering and need. So the transfiguration doesn't send Jesus and his disciples into a fairytale escape but into ministry. Peter suggests that they build dwellings on the mountain, but instead they go back down and right afterward Jesus finds himself healing a young child with convulsions. It's from this point in Luke's gospel that Jesus begins his journey toward Jerusalem and to the cross. And it's from this point in our liturgical year that we begin our journey into Lent, and likewise to the cross.

The garden where my epiphany with Julia's smile happened is called the Alexander Gardens, and it's located in Moscow, Russia, right next to the Kremlin. My family and I lived in Moscow for a few years when I was in high school as part of my father's career in overseas business, and after college when Julia and I were early in our relationship and he still lived there, we had gone there to visit him. It's a part of the world that has a special place in my own heart and story. Central Moscow is beautiful and romantic with its onion domes and gardens. And of course it's also the headquarters of a murderous regime that has unleashed multiple wars against its neighbors, most brutally and spectacularly this week's invasion of Ukraine. My story, my heart-places, aren't separate from the pain and sin of life in this world. Neither are any of ours. The mountain of the Transfiguration sits in a land that is both holy and the site of centuries of war and oppression. Our own homes in California are in a land of conquest and genocide. The beauty of God's presence takes place not in a place apart but in the thick of the world's suffering. And a true epiphany is meant to carry us not farther away from that suffering of the world but closer into it, where Jesus is at work to serve and heal.

I don't know what will happen in Ukraine. What I know is that the God who made the universe and whose glory is revealed in Jesus is there with everyone who is in danger or fear or grief, and in every place where people are hurting, from Ukraine to Afghanistan to our own neighborhoods. I know we get glimpses of God not in the power of bombs and mortars but in acts of compassion and courage and care for others, like Jesus healing that young child.

As we embark on our journey to Jerusalem this Lent, may we carry the vision of Jesus's transfiguration along with us to sustain us, all the way to the cross and tomb, and then beyond it into the new life of resurrection.