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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

February 11, 2024

Year B, Last Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary

[2 Kings 2:1-12](#)

[2 Corinthians 4:3-6](#)

[Mark 9:2-9](#)

[Psalm 50:1-6](#)

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A few nights ago I was outside with my eight-year-old looking at the moon. It was a thin crescent, and we noticed together how if you look really closely, you can see not just the lit-up part of the moon, the crescent shape glowing white, but the rest of the moon too; the dark part making up the full ball.

Earthlight, it's called; which is to say, light from the sun that first reflects off the earth. Some small portion of that light happens to bounce toward the moon. And then some even smaller portion of that light bounces back to us on earth again, to our eyes, just enough to illuminate that dark side of the moon just a little bit.

Sometimes our eyes need to adjust to tell brightness from less-brightness. There's an interesting exhibit at the Exploratorium in San Francisco called "Bright Black" where you first see a card lit up by a bright light, and the card looks white. Then you press a button and another card swings up next to the first one, and you realize that the first card was actually kind of gray, because this second card is a brighter shade. By the time the third and fourth and fifth cards are added alongside, each one successively lighter in shade, it turns out the first card was black the whole time.

Today is a day of light, a day of radiant brightness and reflected brightness. Today Jesus stands on the mountain and his disciples see him suddenly differently, shining with glory, seeing for a moment something that has always been true, yet is now revealed to them in a new way: Jesus is filled with the glory of God. And they see him attended by the two greatest prophets of old: Moses and Elijah, two heroes of ancient Israel. They are here perhaps because they represent the Law and the Prophets, two central sections of scripture. But I think they're here for a different reason: because in their own day, both Moses and Elijah had met God on a mountain.

Moses went up on Mount Sinai as the people of Israel had escaped from slavery in Egypt; he spoke to God face to face and received the Ten Commandments and the whole rest of the Law, and came down to lead the people to the Promised Land. Elijah went to Mount Sinai centuries later, at a time when he was the only prophet of the Lord remaining, when the king was persecuting and pursuing him, and alone on the mountain he met God not in a whirlwind, not in an earthquake, not in a fire, but in a still small voice, or what our more modern translation calls "a sound of sheer silence."

Moses and Elijah were granted a rare and priceless experience. They met God. They had what's sometimes called a theophany, which is a direct encounter with the living God. Theophany is also the Eastern Orthodox name for the Epiphany, the feast of God's revelation to the world in the form of Jesus Christ. And today is the last Sunday in the season after the Epiphany, when that revelation comes to a point of climax in a burst of glory on the mountain, and when Moses and Elijah reappear from out of the past to have another theophany, to meet God face to face once again, this time in the radical and unexpected form of a human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai that first time, scripture tells us his face shone, so brightly he had to wear a veil over his face, because he had beheld God face to face. Moses shone with reflected glory, like the moon reflecting the light of the sun. That glory was bright, the glory of a human being bathed in God's presence. We might not expect there to be any glory brighter than that in this world. And yet, like me at that exhibit at the Exploratorium, today we discover a brighter glory still. Mark, whose gospel version we read today, is the only one of the gospel authors whose version of this Transfiguration story includes the quirky and charming and homely detail that Jesus's clothes dazzle "brighter than any launderer on earth could bleach them." Today Jesus shines with a glory that is not reflected at all but radiates out from within his own person, the glory he shares with God the Father, the glory of the uncreated One.

A moment of awe. A moment, for his disciples, of joy mixed with terror, the unmistakable experience of the presence of that which is completely Other, completely Divine. And then, what next?

We might expect Jesus in the next moment to ascend into heaven in triumph, like Elijah had done so many centuries before. And there will come a time when he will. But not now.

What happens instead, is anticlimax. Suddenly, there he is alone. No Moses, no Elijah, no dazzling radiance. And it is time to go down the mountain.

And here he is in keeping with his prophetic forebears. Moses went down Mount Sinai with the commandments in hand to find an unruly people and forty years of desert wandering ahead. Elijah went down to face a wicked king who wanted him dead. And Jesus, who is both a prophet and more than a prophet, follows in their footsteps as he goes down his mountain to do the hard work of God's mission: to heal and preach and work with unruly and uncomprehending disciples, to anger those in power, to make his way to Jerusalem and to the cross. Which will be a different revelation of his glory, a more mysterious one, flanked not by two prophets but by two thieves, his disciples not awed at his feet but gone and fled and replaced by a jeering crowd. Yet a revelation of his glory it will be nonetheless, for those with eyes to see, for those who can peer into the darkness to see its faint yet unmistakable glow. So today we will go down the mountain too as we turn toward a time of Lent, a time of prayer and fasting, of work and discipleship. But we make this turn, sustained by this vision, carrying the gift of its radiance with us, with a final burst of Alleluia to carry us through to Easter joy.

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Announcements:

- Shrove Sunday: pancakes, Alleluia banner, palms
- Tomorrow Senior Lunch 11am; Ash Wed svcs 8, 12, 7p
- Sunday Forum resumes next week with Ellen two part on Justice
- Amanda: Becoming Beloved Community event 2/25 Letter from B. Jail
- Bill and Inese: Vestry retreat