

THE APPEARANCE
Mark 9:2-13
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 19, 2012

I'm sure you didn't show up today because you didn't want to miss the last Sunday in Epiphany, nor are you all excited because a week from today is the first Sunday in Lent.

Most of us are familiar with Lent but fewer of us understand the significance of Epiphany. Even the name Epiphany seems foreign and obscure.

The Greek word Epiphany means "to appear." So in the context of the Gospel each Sunday in Epiphany tells another story of God gradually "outing" Jesus as the savior of the world, first to the magi who brought their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, then twelve years later to his parents (Mary and Joseph) who, when they found their lost son in the temple having profound conversations with the teachers and elders, were both reminded their oldest son was no ordinary boy, and then eighteen years after that when, at his baptism, Jesus saw the descending dove from heaven and the voice from above proclaim, "You are my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

With each succeeding Sunday in Epiphany God gradually lifts the veil revealing the appearance of himself through his beloved son. But the veil won't be completely lifted until Easter morning when Jesus of Nazareth was finally and fully revealed to be the triumphant Risen Christ.

So the Epiphany Season sets the stage for the greatest story ever told. Each gospel reading for each Sunday in Epiphany has been intentionally chosen to lay the foundation for what was to follow the controversial appearing of the Rabbi from Nazareth, born to die for the sins of the world. That in itself is the greatest epiphany of all: our God suffers for us because he loves us.

Keep in mind these carefully chosen scriptures aren't necessarily read and preached in the order in which they happened. For example, the story of Jesus' baptism is traditionally read on the second Sunday of Epiphany in early January, but the gospel story of Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, which took place immediately after his baptism, isn't read the following Sunday as you'd think, but much later on the first Sunday in Lent. So these readings aren't read in the order they occurred in the Gospels but according to theme. Once again the consistent theme running throughout Epiphany is the gradual unveiling of God through Christ coming into the world.

This is especially the case in the story of Jesus' transfiguration. It's no coincidence this mysterious, mystical event took place on top of a mountain. Recall it

was on Mt. Sinai that Moses met and wrestled with God and later received the Ten Commandments.

Just hours before he was martyred Dr. Martin Luther King gave his last sermon, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop.”

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now because I’ve been to the mountaintop... Like everybody, I would like to have a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that right now. I just want to do God’s will... And I’m happy tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

In the Bible for the patriarchs, prophets and apostles invited to the Mountaintop for an audience with God, it wasn’t so much an honor as it was a time of “bucking up” before being sent back down to carry out a great task against great odds.

Immediately before Jesus took Peter, James and John to accompany him up the mountain, Jesus revealed for the first time the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem to be rejected by the leaders of the religious establishment who would in turn hand him over to the Gentiles to be killed. You may remember Peter violently opposed this decision. All this talk of suffering and death confused and angered Peter, especially since Jesus’ popularity was at an all time high. As Peter saw it, Jesus was acting like the cow which produced a good pail of milk and then kicked it over. Evidently Peter’s epiphany of Jesus was far from complete.

Perhaps that’s why Jesus invited Peter to go along, so he could finally “get it.” Unfortunately, there’s no clear indication Jesus knew exactly what would happen once he reached the top, but obviously Jesus sensed it would be something momentous and he wanted Peter there to see it.

Before saying anything more, let’s put the story of the Transfiguration in context. First, it takes place halfway through Mark’s Gospel. The sunshine days of his ministry were coming to an end. His teachings and healings caused quite a stir in Judea. The people were behind him but the powerful religious elites were against him. Making powerful enemies Jesus realized their plots and conspiracies unintentionally played into God’s hands making his death for the sins of the world inevitable. Now it was time to make the hard decision to die in Jerusalem and stick with it.

Don’t think for a minute Jesus never had any second thoughts about completing his mission. They started during his first temptation in the wilderness and ended with his last temptation in Gethsemane and in between he faced an equally strong temptation when Peter tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem. Remember what Jesus said to Peter? “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus was almost tempted to give in to Peter’s demands - Who could blame him? Would you want to suffer and die for your enemies?

This is the context for the transfiguration. Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. He was resolute, but just barely. That's why he needed the encouragement and affirmation only his beloved Father could give, so Jesus climbed the mountain, hoping for a theophany, an encounter with God that would give him strength for the journey that would end with his passion and death.

Again, there's no indication Jesus knew what to expect when he reached the summit, but whatever his expectations he wouldn't be disappointed.

Certainly Mark's narrative of what happened next was woefully inadequate. He wrote, "And Jesus was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white such as no one on earth could bleach them." (Mark 9:2-3)

The Greek word Mark used for transfigured translates into the English word metamorphosis which means "a profound change in form from one stage to the next," like the caterpillar to the butterfly. Try to imagine what this means. Jesus' humanity could no longer contain his divinity which shined out through every pore of his body. Jesus suddenly morphed into his indescribable glorious appearance.

Which brings me back to the definition of the Greek word epiphany which simply means "to make known or appear." From the time of Jesus' infancy through to his childhood and adulthood, God slowly lifted the veil to reveal himself to the world through his only begotten son.

When the wise men sought him out in his infancy, as his parents came to terms with their son being a divine prodigy, when Jesus himself after much struggle and anguish accepted his calling to be the Suffering Christ and finally when Peter, James and John witnessed Jesus' transfiguration, throughout Jesus' life God was slowly but surely lifting the veil surrounding the mystery of his incarnation, becoming flesh to dwell among us filled with grace and truth.

All this is precisely why the Season of Epiphany needs to be lifted up and embraced. Epiphany informs us Jesus wasn't just a great rabbi and miracle worker, not just the founder of one of the world's great religions, not just a community organizer and social activist, not just a profound philosopher or even the greatest man who ever lived. None of these descriptions are adequate.

Instead the Season of Epiphany reveals Jesus to be the only begotten Son of God who came in the form of a servant, and abdicated his divinity to secure our humanity.

This Ash Wednesday evening I hope to see all of you here so together we can begin our journey through Lent. This is not a time to saunter like a tourist. It is a time to be like Jesus - set your face towards Jerusalem so you, unlike Peter, can stand at the foot of the cross to watch the greatest but necessary injustice in human history: God's people nailing God to the cross. Why did God let this happen? One word: LOVE.

Let God's love transfigure you so you can suddenly appear Christ-like to your friends and neighbors.

One more thing, and for your own sake, don't get this wrong: God called you here, to this church, to be empowered to love and serve. Babcock Church isn't a store where you can be a consumer of religious goods. We are here to worship God and be servants of Christ, willing to sacrifice our time, energy and treasure so others will hear and claim the good news: The Kingdom of God is nearer than you think.

Let us pray.