

Epiphany VI

2 Kings 2:1-12

2 Cor. 4:3-6

Mk 9:2-9

St. Mary the Virgin

February 11, 2018

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“Jesus led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves.” Amen.

On this final Sunday of Epiphany, we journey with Peter, James, and John to a mountaintop, a place away from the cares and demands of daily life; a place where they experience an epiphany--a moment where they are confronted with the true nature of Jesus, beyond what they could imagine in the material, everyday world.

Epiphanies are those moments of enlightenment, where we come to understand things from a very different standpoint, and gain a completely fresh perspective. They often take us completely by surprise, just as they did the disciples. Epiphany moments deepen us; they transform our understanding.

Biblically, mountains are often places to encounter the Holy. They inspire awe, and offer an unparalleled perspective. They also can be places of danger, even treachery. Mountains aren't places for wandering alone, without experience or a guide. Jesus takes only his closest disciples there, those whose faith has shown promise for someday leading others. Yet he knows their understanding must deepen in order to sustain them through the coming journey to Jerusalem and beyond.

Peter had already admitted that Jesus was the Messiah, in response to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” But Peter hadn't yet understood what Messiah meant from the depth of his being. Obviously overcome by what he saw, Peter tried to place Jesus with the leading figures of his Jewish tradition--Moses and Elijah. But God calls him out, beyond what he can imagine, to a new, transformative understanding of Messiah—the incarnation of divinity into humanity. Some things have to be experienced before they can be fully understood.

This morning's gospel is perhaps akin to a spiritual Olympics, a peak experience where we glimpse something utterly beyond ourselves, and which gives us a glimpse of what could—or perhaps will—be possible. The Transfiguration is intended to give a vision of the fulfillment of God's intention. That vision offers hope to a people—and a world--filled with despair.

Now too is a time in need of hope. This week's opening of the Winter Olympics, where peak experiences (pardon the pun) occur with some frequency, offer a distraction from our trouble-filled world, but also a vision of hope and what could be possible. At least for a number of

athletes, the Olympics represents the ultimate summit. Many train with this goal in mind nearly all their lives. Others just happen into it. Few make it to the top of the podium.

If you watched part of the opening ceremony, you may have been struck by the diverse stories of how some athletes came to be there, as well as the general excitement of anticipation. I was particularly touched by watching the Korean athletes walk in together, North and South as one, something still not imaginable from a political standpoint. There was a sense of a deep desire for spiritual if not physical unity. Although politics and corruption have surrounded Olympic games, they also have offered moments of beauty, hope, and possibility for how we as nations can rejoice in our distinct identities yet be able to relate to one another peaceably.

Many athletes have spoken about what a transformative experience it was for them to be part of the Olympics. Some have maintained the rigorous discipline of their sport, year after year, in order to be eligible to return again, and again. Downhill skier Lindsey Vonn has worked herself back from several devastating injuries to take part. Skaters have come back from a spine fracture, foot fracture, and surgery for a life threatening illness within the past two years to be able to take part.

Imagine what it might mean if we applied ourselves in this way to take part in an Olympics of the Spirit. How would we train our spiritual lives to be ready? What would make us want to care enough to do so? What might a Spiritual Olympics look like? An Olympics where all can participate who wish to do so, and are willing to prepare themselves, and where no one loses? What would be your spiritual sport...or your discipline of choice? How would it help you deepen your understanding of God's mission in the world, and your desire to be at-one with God?

Some of us may have had Epiphany moments—those peak experiences where we sense another reality beyond the here-and-now everyday world, and open us up to new possibilities. They might not involve the chariots of fire that Elisha saw, a dazzling transfiguration, or a voice speaking from a cloud. In my own peak moment some years ago, it simply involved getting lost, and opening the door of a massive old stone building to find out where I was. As I entered, a numinous feeling came over me, making me a bit dizzy. The only words I could put to it was, "Uh-oh Paula, you've done it now." I soon would find out that I had stumbled into Harvard Divinity School, a far cry from my job in the corporate world on the west coast. A few more experiences that day, and the following day, confirmed that this was an invitation to transform my life in a way that would become an adventure with wherever God might lead.

Sometimes our Epiphany moments occur closer to home, places where God touches our lives in ways that help us to live in our surroundings at a deeper spiritual level. Some have spoken of feeling a deep spiritual peace during moments of great difficulty or tragedy, that have helped them get through it. Others have sensed a spiritual presence that made them think differently about what they were seeing or hearing. A parishioner once described worshipping on Sunday morning in the midst of the congregation as having the feeling of being part of something bigger, something connecting him with divine presence and purpose, that he didn't feel

elsewhere in his life. Epiphany moments, peak experiences, occur all around us when we are open to them.

The purpose of these experiences, even if not often talked about, is to reassure us that the spiritual life is real, that God is with us. So that when we descend into the long, difficult valleys that daily life inevitably brings, we have a depth of understanding that not only can sustain us but will call us forward to act or to be spiritually present for others. The purpose is not to build ourselves up, to make us feel or act more spiritually worthy than others. Instead, they must focus us outward, toward living humbly in right relationship with God and with one another.

As Roman Catholic Sister Joan Chittester has said,

“Real religion is not about building temples and keeping shrines. Real religion is about healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten who are at the silent bottom of every pinnacle, every hierarchy and every system....”¹

It’s about being transformed, through our Epiphany moments and spiritual experiences, so that we can be fully present for others. As a parishioner wisely put it, “we need to be transformed before we think about transforming the world.”

For me, the inner transformation didn’t come in seminary, but in the parish as a seminarian intern. I had learned a lot from books and professors. But when I faced the congregation as I began my first sermon, I saw faces with decades more experience and far more wisdom than I could offer. Ministry suddenly wasn’t about “doing to” or “doing for” others, but instead about “being with,” and “learning from” one another. It was about listening as well as sharing the good news of God’s presence; about letting myself be guided as well as to guide.

Transformation is a lifelong process. The peak experiences are memorable, but the real journey is made up of the insights and vistas all along the way up, and down. The disciples couldn’t stay at the mountaintop; nor can we. In a few days, we will descend from our Epiphany mountaintop into the ashes of our humanity as we begin the journey of Lent. This season, we will take a journey through a spiritual Olympics of sorts, by exploring different disciplines or regular activities that can help us deepen and continue our spiritual transformation into agents of reconciliation as Christ’s body in the world. Where would you like spiritual transformation in your life?

¹ Joan Chittister, “The Role of Religion in Today’s Society,” Program 3508, *30 Good Minutes*. Chicago Sunday Evening Club, November 24, 1991. <http://www.30goodminutes.org/index.php/archives/23-member-archives/722-joan-chittister-program-3508>