

Westgate Baptist Community

Transfiguration Sunday 26 Feb 2006

## **Being present to the moment God has given us..**

A Sermon by Geoff Wraight

Mark 9:2-13

Have you ever had an Epiphany? An epi- what? An epiphany.

I wouldn't have a clue you might answer...

Actually, it's a very good word for a spelling bee..

Epiphany E – p – i – p – h – a – n – y

The dictionary definition says:

- 1.the manifestation of a divine being
- 2.a sudden intuitive leap of understanding, especially through an ordinary but striking occurrence

So it is one of those aha! experiences – when suddenly, through an unexpected and sometimes extraordinary event you finally get it!

In the Christian tradition it is a word that describes an experience of revelation or enlightenment more often than not associated with the mystery of life or the mystery of God.

January 6<sup>th</sup> is generally called the Epiphany with a capital E.. In traditional church calendars it is the day that we remember the arrival of the Wise Men to visit the infant Jesus thus revealing his identity as someone special in the eyes of God. In some traditions it also refers to the baptism of Jesus and the dove the descends on him and the voice from heaven – signs that Jesus is indeed associated with the divine.

For the readers of Mark's Gospel, this strange story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is an Epiphany – it reveals early in the story that Jesus is indeed the chosen one of God.

Six days later, 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,  
9:3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.

Peter James and John see Jesus change in front of them. He begins to glow in front of them. In fact, I love the way Mark puts it , “his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them” When I was a young person hearing this story read in church I could help thinking it sounded like a washing powder ad!!  
Whiter than White! better than any soap powder could ever achieve!!

But I think we get the picture - its like Gandalf the wizard in the Lord of the Rings movie when he rides down from the mountain leading the riders of Rohan into the battle for Helms Deep. He is dazzling white and his clothes and hair literally glow and blind the orcs and goblins as they ride into the fray of battle..

But back to our story of these three blokes with Jesus on the mountain... After Jesus starts to glow ..

9:4 And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

So here we have two dead blokes appearing like ghosts but as real as anything talking to Jesus. The key to the meaning of this appearance is the identity of the men. They were Moses – the great father and leader of

Israel - the one through whom God give the law. And Elijah – the most recognizable and perhaps greatest of all the prophets of Israel.

So to the Jewish readers of this story and of course to the Jewish men Peter, James and John, significance of this event should have been obvious. Jesus was equal in importance to these great fathers of their nation and their faith. There is something much bigger going on here. This Jesus is someone very central to God's dealings with the world.

It was an epiphany – it was a “mountain top” experience or at least it should have been..

What happens next is just one of those wonderful bits in Mark's gospel. The disciples, as is so often true (and comforting) in the gospel of Mark, are a bit bumbling and clueless – they are very human.

Then Peter blurts out, “Boss, this is fantastic! What a moment! How about we knock up three huts, so that you, Moses and Elijah can all stay here longer.”

What is going on here? Peter wants to hang on to this moment - in an almost embarrassing and clumsy outburst he seems to kill the mystery and revelation of the moment. They turn around and the vision has gone. They descend the mountain with Jesus warning them not to tell anyone what they saw until after the Resurrection.

The key to understanding this story lies in its position in the series of events in Mark's Gospel. It stands near the beginning of the section in the story where Jesus the Son of Man (as he is called in Mark) must face the unavoidable journey to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. The way to glory must be via the cross.

The journey from the mountain must lead through the valley. Perhaps this is why Jesus urges them not to focus on his identity without first understanding the way of the cross and the resurrection which cannot happen without the preceding suffering and death.

It is why this passage is read at this time of the church year. We stand at the threshold of Lent. Lent is the 40 days leading up to Good Friday and Easter. It is a time of journeying with Jesus on the road to Jerusalem and the cross.. It is time for self – reflection for making changes to the way we live. For being open to the mystery of God's life and how this might change us.

I have always been fascinated by Peter's outburst in this story – it some ways you can feel yourself identifying with Peter. We all have a tendancey to want to hold on to or seek after the mountain top experience. We long to see the bigger picture, to understand why things are the way they are to feel like we have control of our lives.

But the Mystery of God's life will surprise us most when we are open to it and ready to be present with it.

There is a story about an astronomer and a priest who find themselves traveling in the same compartment on a long train journey. After eyeing each other off for a bit they strike up a conversation.

'So you're a theologian?' says the astronomer nodding toward the dog collar.

'That's right,' replies the priest.

'Ah! I see,' says the scientist. 'Well, I guess that's "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so".'

'Hmm... I suppose you could say that,' the priest responds. 'You're a scientist are you?'

'That's right,' says the first man. 'An astronomer.'

'I see,' says the priest. 'Well, that'd be "twinkle, twinkle little star how I wonder what you are", wouldn't it?'

In a way both descriptions are right, though in the context of the story they are intended to be mutual put-downs. Astronomy does arise from a deep astonishment about the heavens. And theology, at least of the Christian type, is equally astonished at the biblical story of Jesus of Nazareth and what it has to do with the mystery of God.

And the more we think we have it all sewn up and explained in a simple formula the further we will be from experiencing the true mystery before us.

The key to both is the willingness to stand in the presence of Mystery in the case of the Christian perspective, Mystery with a capital M. And secondly, to be open to new ways of understanding and experience.

Back in the early 1990's when I was in the final year of my undergraduate theological education at Whitley College, I remember reading and writing much on the mystery of humanity in God and the meaning of God reconciling the world through Christ.

At the time Tim was about 4 years old and each evening after the usual story book reading one of us would sit on the bed and read from a little book of Bible stories and reflections for pre-schoolers that we were trying out.

I have a vivid memory one evening of reading a story about God providing for the people in one of the old testament stories. The theme of the little reflection was, "How God helps us". At the end of the story it encouraged us to ask the question, "How could God help us?" So I ask little Tim (he doesn't remember this I think), "How could God help us Tim?"

There was quite a pause as he thought about this for a moment then he looks up at me with a perfectly serious face and says, "Well God could visit us couldn't he?"

This was one of those Epiphany moments for me. In the thousands of words I had read and written about this truth nothing had hit home to me as powerfully as this simple childlike understanding..of the mystery of the incarnation.

My eyes glazed and a lump in my throat, I replied "Well yes he could Tim, and one day I hope you'll be able to see how he has already!"

Our challenge is to be present in the moment that is given to us. And I think that this quality of being present has much to do with being open to be surprised again by the mystery of God's life and story.

Being present in the moment God has given us is a quality of faith that extends very much to our relationships with others. Learning to be fully present and attentive to another person is a precious gift – and I think close to the heart of the Gospel message of God's love and acceptance.

The challenge to us in this time of the year is to be present to the mystery of God as it is known in the story of Jesus and the journey to cross and resurrection.

I think Lent provides us with a unique opportunity to be open to and present with the mystery of our faith.

Why not give yourselves the time and space to do just that this Lent. Come to the Ash Wednesday Service this year especially if you haven't been before, use the Meditation guide to reflect quietly your life and your faith each week of Lent.

Be present in the moment God has given you and rather than try to spell the word Epiphany – you might just experience it in a life-changing way!

Let's pray..

God of Grace and Creator of life, we glimpse the power and mystery of your presence in Jesus Christ, but like Peter we sometimes want to hold on to old experiences, to memories and highs that no longer truly sustain us. Help us to have the courage to heed your call, to listen to Jesus and to follow him down the mountain, all the way to the cross. Amen.