

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 14, 2021 Year B
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany. It is also Valentine's Day! Even in the pandemic, when my shopping habits are limited, I have noticed a lot of advertisements for today. What are you going to buy for your loved one to show them how much you love them? And I notice that much of what we buy to celebrate Valentine's Day is shiny! Chocolate in gleaming foil, and bright flowers delivered on gray wintry days, and jewelry: silver, and gold, and glittering gems. I do not list any of these things to give my husband ideas—I promise! But the shininess of gifts of love—the gleam and glitter, catches my attention on this Last Sunday of Epiphany, because Epiphany is the season of shininess.

Our lessons today do not disappoint. We have Elijah riding to heaven on the chariot of fire. We have Jesus, with his clothes *dazzling*. And Paul tells us that the light of God shines in our own hearts.

In today's first reading. Elisha, the young protégé, will not let Elijah, the wise old prophet, die, because he cannot bear to let him go. He wants to stay with his beloved mentor, who has taught him so much. He cannot face this loss. Finally, knowing that Elijah must go, he begs for a blessing, a *double share of Elijah's spirit*. Elisha never actually sees Elijah's death—but he sees brightness carry him away—as though he is being carried on a chariot of fire.

And it is easy in this gray, pandemic time to understand Elisha's sorrow. The loss of Elijah will change him forever. We understand about loss changing us forever. But, although Elijah must go, Elisha's request is granted and his ministry is marked by even more power than Elijah's! The fire of that chariot shines through Elisha's life.

That light has been shining through all of the lessons of this Epiphany season. The light of the Star of Bethlehem that brought the Wise Ones to the stable reminds us that the birth of Jesus was a time when earth and heaven were so connected that God reached down to touch us here on earth.

Several weeks ago, on the first Sunday after Epiphany, we heard the story of Jesus being baptized in the river Jordan. And, Mark tells us, *just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:10-11). And again the heavens open and God touches us here on earth—only this time, the light doesn't shine from a star a night. The light shines as if on the wing of a bird in the brilliant daylight. And this time, when God touches the earth, the grown man Jesus hears the voice of our loving God.

Mark doesn't tell us that the people who witnessed the baptism saw the shining dove or heard the voice—but only that Jesus did. The light of God in that story is a personal epiphany—it is a confirmation for Jesus that he is doing the right thing. We hear what the presence of God was like for Jesus, but we are not told what it was like for the others who were there.

In today's story from Mark's Gospel, the heavens open again, but not before we see the light. And we are not the only ones who see it. Peter and James and John are there too, witnesses to the light that comes from Jesus himself: *And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.* This time, God's presence becomes known first in the strange change in their dear friend and then in an overshadowing cloud, *and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* For Peter and James and John, the presence of God is known in the dazzle and the cloud and the voice, and it is terrifying.

And so, Peter speaks out in a kind of befuddled, addled way—*it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.*

Peter and James and John do not know what was happening, and although Mark tells us it was terrifying, still, they do not want it to end. Their tradition taught them that Moses and Elijah were alive in heaven—that is, neither Moses nor Elijah experienced earthly death. Remember, Elijah was quite alive in Elisha's sight when he rode to heaven on a chariot of fire. Maybe Peter, James, and John have followed Jesus up a mountain and into heaven. Perhaps if they put up some shelters, they will be able to hold on to this moment.

And then *from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* And it is the same voice when God sees Jesus the man being baptized and when God beholds Jesus transfigured in God's own glory.

It is no wonder to me that Peter wanted to hold on to the moment, to build a shelter and hold them in. Because here is the thing, if that voice from heaven was true, if what Peter and James and John saw in that dazzling light was really there—then Peter and James and John are standing there in the presence of God. They can be seen by God. And they have to wonder, when God looks at them, what does God see?

And that is the question that Paul was considering when he wrote his Second Letter to the Corinthians, which is our second reading today. Paul is writing to a group of people who have already become a church. They know the power of living a life in Jesus. And yet, they are a group of people who live in the real world. They live in a culture that sees its own pleasure, a place where *the god of this world has blinded* them to the light of God. And they live in a profoundly unequal culture, where wealth and political power go hand in hand, and some folks have much, but many more have little. Sound familiar?

Just like the Corinthians, we live in a world where we know the love of Jesus, and we know the blinding light of culture. And this year, the restrictions of medical pandemic have allowed us to see as starkly as ever the glaring inequality and polarization of our society.

But even though we have not been able to meet in person in the last year, week by week we have gathered together and proclaimed that we are "drawn in by God's grace." That is, we acknowledge that in gathering, even on YouTube or Zoom or Facebook, we are together in the presence of God. The question is, if we are here in the presence of God—if we can be seen by God—when God looks at us, what does God see?

St. Paul's answer is this: *we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.* And the truth is that even when we have not been able to gather safely inside, we still work hard for the good of all the people that Jesus loves. Before the pandemic, we already had a weekly collection of food for the Westfield Food Pantry. And now? We have our own Food Pantry on church property. And our Chapel is full of food which will be distributed throughout the month. And next month, we will collect and distribute more! Just last week, we added a distribution box for socks,

hats, gloves, and underwear—and the box was filled and then emptied in the first few days. And so, we will keep collecting and keep distributing.

For the past two weeks, our Program Minister has helped church members sign up to be vaccinated, and they have driven people to get their shots—and they have more appointments in the next several weeks. And you have never seen someone as happy as Jess Lee is when they help one person get closer to post-pandemic safety. Why?

Because we do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

That last is a little hard to hear—especially the word slave—but set aside for a moment all the bad historical baggage the word *slave* brings with it, and think about the pronoun. We are YOUR servants for JESUS' sake. Why have we developed pandemic ministries? Why not use this time to rest? We do it FOR OTHERS for Jesus' sake. We share all of the gifts that our minds and bodies allow because all of those things are for others, for Jesus' sake.

For eleven months, every single Sunday, my silent morning prayer has been a lament, “Really, dear God? One more time, I have to worship in this odd way, where I cannot be with the people in real time and space?” Oh, how I understand why Peter wanted to pitch those tents and keep Jesus close!

It is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. But here's the thing, just as Jesus was transfigured before them—and just as Jesus was changed—so were Peter and James and John! When you stand in the light of God, your world changes forever. Just ask Elisha.

Eleven months into the pandemic, we know we are changed. As more and more of us get vaccinated, our ministry will shift again—and I cannot tell you exactly what we will look like. But I do know this, the shiny glimmer of God's grace continues to shine on us, even in a pandemic, even in a seriously broken world, because our God is alive and *we do not proclaim ourselves, we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as the servants of one another for Jesus' sake.*