

Last Epiphany – Year A – March 6, 2011
Exodus 24: 12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9
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We start today with an important question: How many dogs does it take to change a light bulb? Here are some responses from our favorite pets. First, a golden retriever: “The sun is shining, the day is young, we’ve got our whole lives ahead of us, and you’re inside worrying about a burned out bulb?” Border collie: “Just one? No problem. Then I’ll replace any wiring that’s not up to code.” Jack Russell: “I’ll just pop it in while I’m bouncing off the walls and the furniture.” Rottweiler: “Make me.” Big old lab: “Oh me, me!!! Pleeeeeze let me change the light bulb! Can I? Can I?” German shepherd: “I’ll change it as soon as I’ve led these people from the dark, checked to make sure I haven’t missed anyone, and made one more patrol of the perimeter to see that no one has tried to take advantage of the situation.” Poodle: “Let the border collie do it. By the time he finishes rewiring the house, my nails will be dry.” Cocker spaniel: “Why change it? I can still pee on the carpet in the dark.” Australian Shepherd: “First, I’ll put all the light bulbs in a little circle....” Finally, the Dachshund: “You know I can’t reach that stupid lamp!” Now I know as we were listening, we secretly identified with at least one of these points of view!

We end the season of Epiphany in a blaze of glory with Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain accompanied by appearances of Moses and Elijah, and in the presence of three disciples: Peter, James and John. This is the full sensory experience, including a remarkable vision, a great cloud that overshadows the scene, the voice of God, and Jesus returned to his earthly persona touching each of the disciples. The transfiguration has long been defined as confirmation of Jesus’ divinity, a glimpse of the glory awaiting Him and us in the resurrection, and a sign of new and unending life beyond death. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the prophets, respectively, with Jesus as the fulfillment of both. Matthew emphasizes the links between Moses’ own epiphany, when he receives the Law from God in the divine cloud. There are also allusions the apocalyptic visions of the prophet Daniel.

This is the ultimate epiphany moment for Jesus’ disciples. A vision that Jesus commands them not to speak about until He has been raised from the dead. In fact, epiphany moments rarely yield all their truth without intentional reflection. You and I are also invited to pray and ponder on this passage to discern how God’s glory is revealed to us today, how this story still speaks to us today, still overshadows us, and still touches us today. Just how we do that will likely depend on how we like to change our light bulbs so that we can see more clearly and dispel the darkness around us. In other words, how we are wired by God to shed new light on the situations and challenges of life. Maybe on reflection we will also see how we resist God’s revelations, and the light of truth. Or even how we try to delay change, either through fear, or because we are distracted, and have a hard time focusing on the vision in front of us.

To begin our conversation, I offer a prayer from St. Anselm. “O Lord my God, my creator and re-creator, my soul longs for you. Tell me what you are, beyond what I have seen, so that I may see clearly....” A major theme of the season of epiphany is the message that God is with us. Last Sunday’s reading from the prophet Isaiah is a message of hope and vision for His exiled children trying to make their way home. The people believed that God had forsaken them. Isaiah’s prophetic words dispel that notion, clearly stating that God cannot forget any of His children, because we are engraved in the palms of His hands. The Hebrew word for the palm of the hands can also refer to the soles of the feet. As such, it’s my belief that we are indeed engraved in God’s hands and feet through the nails of Jesus’ crucifixion. As the most quoted verse from the Gospel of John (3:16) tells us, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” The vision of God in Christ Jesus on the mountain, speaks to our deepest joy, that we too are blessed in the hope of the resurrection, and the life of the world to come. Our salvation is assured, through our faith in Christ. Jesus returns to His earthly form, to continue His work following the path that leads to Jerusalem and the cross. Just for a moment, His resurrection life is revealed in the world as a reminder that by God’s grace we too are

invited to live our resurrection lives now. There's no need to wait. By virtue of our Baptism, our own anointing as God's beloved children, we are already being changed by God and equipped daily to do the work He has given us to do. We are already clothed in His righteousness to shine His light into the darkest places of the world. Paradoxically, like Jesus, we receive no protection from suffering, but there is no hiding God's light or hope either. With the eyes of our faith, and the ability to see as Christ sees, we are much better equipped to deal with the crushing reality of life in the valleys. God is with us, and we have no reason to be afraid.

There's quite a bit of talking in this passage. Moses and Elijah confer with Jesus. Peter gets sidetracked and offers to build a permanent monument to the honor the moment. God basically tells us all to shut up and listen to Jesus, and then Jesus tells the disciples not to be afraid, before commanding us to keep quiet until after He is resurrected. Well, it's been a couple of thousand years since the resurrection, so what do we hear today, and what are we going to say about this epiphany revelation? "Listen to Him," says the voice of God, and that seems to be a timeless piece of good advice. Listening to God in Christ Jesus is called discernment, and is best achieved through a life grounded in the discipline of prayer. In fact, in Luke's version of the transfiguration, the whole experience is surrounded by prayer. Change is challenging for many of us. Prayer is our center of calm, connecting us to the infinite, eternal, and unchanging presence of God in Christ Jesus. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In other words, when God tells us to listen to Jesus, God is also encouraging us to center ourselves in prayer, so that we might know the intimate presence of God in all things, and through all things, especially in the inevitability of change. The harder we find it is to accept change, or the more we are inclined to resist change, the more centering prayer will help us see and recognize, experience and feel, God's presence with us in this ever-changing world.

Listening to Jesus, also involves listening to His life in deeds as well as in words. Richard J. Foster has a helpful insight for us here when he writes, "The contrast between God's way of doing things and our way is never more acute than in [the] area of human change and transformation. We focus on specific actions: God focuses on us. We work from the outside in: God works from the inside out. We try: God transforms." One of the most significant moments on the mountain occurs when the disciples are overcome by fear and Jesus touches each of them saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." Peter is focused on building dwellings, and Jesus touches him. All three of the disciples fall to the ground in fear as they hear God's voice, and Jesus touches them. Jesus' touch is God's way of focusing on us, when we want to distract ourselves or run away in fear. Jesus' touch is no fleeting physical contact – it is as intimate as it gets, a closer bond than superglue. So close in fact, that once Jesus has touched us, and we come to Him in faith, the Holy Spirit takes up residence. Think about it. The only way that the divine presence of the Holy Spirit can possibly dwell within us is because Jesus' touch has transformed us, and God the Father now sees us as He sees Jesus, His beloved. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we're constantly being changed from the inside out. God in Christ has touched us, and we can never be the same again. As we read in the John's letter, "There is no fear in love, but God's perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Just before this passage in Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus tell us that, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). We leave epiphany behind today and prepare to enter the new season of Lent, a time of self-examination, with a more important reflection question. How many of us need to change our lamps so that we can see God at work in us and around us, and shine more fully with God's life-giving light?

Amen.