

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
Last Epiphany, Transfiguration of Jesus
26 February 2006
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God's Real World

2 Kings 2:1-12
Mark 8:31-33, 9:2-8

There's a lot of razzle-dazzle in our readings this morning! Flaming chariots swing low, comin' for to carry Elijah home. Jesus' garments gleam and his face is radioactive. There's enough fire and light coming at us off these pages to warrant the use of serious protective gear! What's going on in the liturgy today?

It's the last Sunday of Epiphany, the season of insight, light, and revelation. For the last eight weeks, our worship and the scriptures we have been reading have led us to uncover a great mystery. They have been shedding copious light on the gift that Jesus is to the world. We have watched him heal the sick, cast out demons, and teach good news to the poor. Along with us, all the spectators in our stories have been asking, "Who is this?" And a few of them, and maybe a few of us, have begun to connect the dots. Maybe, just maybe this Jesus is the Promised One from God, who can make all the difference.

The Epiphany season is a time when an age-old hope for mercy, healing and peace firms up and takes shape, a human shape, a Jesus shape. In the healing, truth-telling and liberation that Jesus brings to a particular people and to a particular place and time, we catch a glimpse of the future that God intends for the whole creation. It looks nothing like the one we thought we were doomed to—the endless repetition of the miseries, catastrophes and injustices of the past. In Epiphany, then, we take heart. In its light we see Light.

But today the season ends. And on this last day of divine light, our scripture readings are downright pyrotechnical, like closing ceremonies at the Olympics, as if to say to Epiphany, "No, not yet! Don't be over! Don't go!"

And why wouldn't the church be reluctant to see it go? We all know what's coming next. An arduous season, more shadowed, more mysterious—Baseball. I mean Lent. It begins this Wednesday, and in six short weeks, if we allow it to, it

will drive us into the wilderness of human sin, face us with our complicity in the world's suffering, and confront head-on our love of violence. And then it will deposit us at the cross.

And who in his right mind would want to go there? Certainly not Peter, as we found out today. Jesus gave him a nickname—Rocky—and upon him Jesus said he would build the church. But Peter turns out to be more blockhead than rock, which may explain a few things about the way the church has turned out. When Jesus tries to tell him about the cross, he goes ballistic. In Peter's religious imagination, Messiahs don't lose, they don't suffer ingloriously at the hands of the wicked, they don't die on crosses. Messiahs win, they beat up their opponents, they annihilate their enemies, they gloat over them, and they never, ever forgive them—*not ever*. Jesus (whom you want as your savior, not your therapist) listens to Peter's theology of glory, calls him the Devil, and tells him to get the hell out of his sight.

But true to his own teaching about love of enemies, Jesus does not in fact disown him, even though, as someone noted wryly, he does not need ESP to predict that Peter will soon deny him three times. But that comes later. Now Rocky gets to be a mountain-climber, along with Zebedee's sons, James and John—who, by the way, aren't so swift either, as you will discover if you read Mark, chapter 10. There, Jesus repeats his frightening teaching about the humiliation awaiting him in Jerusalem. He has barely finished speaking when the two brothers start lobbying him to occupy the most prestigious seats in the kingdom to come. Talk about not getting the message! And this is the inner circle, my friends, the brain trust—three half-conscious disciples who are definitely not with the program (which always makes me feel better about my own discipleship, since it seems clear that talent, tact, and virtue are not the determining factors when God calls people to carry on the ministry of Christ).

Anyway, up the mountain they go, and you heard what happens next. All three of them—Peter, who wants the Messiah to be glorious, and the Zebedee brothers, who covet that glory for themselves—suddenly get a lot more glory than they bargained for and a lot more glory than they can handle, giving new meaning to the old saw about being careful what you pray for. The disciples are, to put it mildly, *terrified*.

John and James are stupefied into silence, but Peter runs off at the mouth. He informs Jesus that gee, it's really great to be up there, which presumably Jesus has already noticed, being the one who is actually suffused with the glory and the

pleasure of God. No matter. Peter rattles on, sputtering something about creating some dwellings, oblivious to the character of the glory that has lit up the mountain—the glory of God’s pleasure in a humbled love that refuses to impose itself, much less crush its enemies. Peter mistakes it for another kind—the kind that is oh so impressed with itself and requires a monument. And so he says really dumb things, providing the best evidence we have that this episode might really be historical. Who, scholars ask, would make up this embarrassing stuff about the pillars of the early church and actually leave it in the gospel record for posterity?

Soon the cloud passes and the voice stops speaking and the light is gone and they see only Jesus. He gets them up off their faces and back down the mountain, cautioning them not to tell anyone, which is a totally superfluous thing to say, because they did not have a clue where to begin the telling, not having understood what happened up there at all. And I’m not sure we know where to begin either. It all seems so strange, and it would be easy for a listener to think you were mad, or at least deluded.

I know people who think that I am deluded because I read, believe, and live by these old impenetrable stories. They think I’m perfectly nice, mind you, but pre-scientific. And they think so not just because of wild stories like the Transfiguration—this story about a human being like you and me who was so enamored of God’s vision, so caught up in God’s mercy, so given over to God’s power, and so intent on God’s kingdom that he literally lit up, body and spirit, with the very light of God’s pleasure, and thereby opened our eyes to our own light, our own vocation to be lamps in this shadowed world.

No, they think I am deluded just for following Jesus in the first place. What bothers them is that we who do follow him just don’t seem to “get” the world, not the “real world,” anyway. We live on mountaintops with our heads in the clouds spouting inanities about universal peace and justice, when every sensible and morally serious person knows that in the real world you have to do hard things, make tough choices, and eventually compromise your ideals. And so for them it’s the real world versus...what? Mindless idealism? Optimism? Liberal softness? The Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Paul Marshall, the Episcopal bishop of Bethlehem, PA, once commented on what he called a “very silly” op-ed piece in the local paper that argued that in the real world we need “unrestrained capitalism and not compassion, and unequivocal support for foreign governments with whom we are allied, regardless of their actions.” “My response,” he wrote, “is to fantasize that there probably is a special place in hell for people who take religious types aside and deliver condescending

lectures about ‘the real world,’ as though standing at a thousand death beds, knowing first-hand the many forms of human misery, and nurturing hope where the system is not about to provide it were somehow ‘unreal.’ It is those who think that the real world is about the acquisition of wealth and power, and not about their dispersal, who live in unreality. It is those who struggle for status who lie in obscurity. It is those obsessed with control who are not free. It is those who would be *embarrassed* to suddenly be less affluent who dwell in deepest shadows.”

Now this is not to say that there is an “us” who believe in the Gospel and a “them” who believe in the real world, and that “we” are better. We are included in them, to some extent anyway, because we are always crossing back and forth over the boundary of faith and religious imagination. The world that is forever telling us to face facts and accept reality is our world too. When we are not cultivating a habit of resistance, which is a very hard habit to acquire in our culture, we hear ourselves echoing our detractors. Prayer and hope and mercy are fine, we say, but sometimes, sometimes, you’ve just got to face facts. We are not immune to the allure of the ‘real world.’

The critical question for us is who defines the facts? Who gets to say what’s real? In a sermon delivered several years ago now, Tom Dipko, a former UCC official, called to mind a flap that occurred during the Reagan Administration. It was about something then-Interior Secretary James Watt had said. Perhaps you remember it. Who could forget it? Questioned about the conservation of forests, Watts had cavalierly noted that it won’t make much difference in the end if we have this or that policy of conservation because, “After the last tree is felled ... Christ will have returned.” And after that, presumably, we will have no need of trees, or of the planet for that matter. Bill Moyers summed up his astonished outrage in a NY Times op-ed piece by noting that in American politics, “the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe to sit in the seats of power.” And that was in the Reagan Administration. We could add our own examples.

Friends, every time we gather here to go about the business of being Christ’ church, we acknowledge and renew a struggle over who gets to name the facts and who gets to say what’s real. And this struggle is a struggle of imagination and faith, or better said, the imagination of faith, because faith is a conviction about what is unseen, a hope for the yet-to-be-revealed. The question embedded deep in all our singing and praying and confessing and offering and serving is whether we will be led to live more by the prose of CNN than by the poetry of the transfiguration of Jesus.

People who live by such things as transfiguration and all the other miracles of God's pleasure are the ones who are said to be delusional, but our dear deluded Jesus teaches us to see where the delusions actually lie. He shows us how to fix our gaze on and offer God's light and pleasure to all the people and places that the poor imagination-starved 'real world' has abandoned as hopeless.

And as we learn to see more deeply and wisely, more truthfully and faithfully; as we begin to exercise more vigorously the imagination of faith, we will be made able to offer the world a truly real reality—God's vision for us—and with that vision, a new and indestructible hope.

We will see, as preacher Will Willimon has written, a nondescript Rabbi "squatting in the dust with a gaggle of common fisherfolk and former tax collectors and know that they are the light of the world." Even Peter.

We will hear a strange opinionated former Pharisee named Paul tell a "ragtag crowd at First Church Corinth, after he had just chewed them out for fighting in church and acting bad in their bedrooms", 'You are God's treasure.'"

We will recognize in this congregation, just as we are (get this!), God's answer to what's wrong with the world, a sneak preview of God's cosmic redemption.

And we will meet a million people like the woman in Louisiana who raised, on her income as a maid, sixteen foster children, and who, when asked how she did it, simply replied, "I saw a new world a-comin.'"

So must we, brother and sisters. By the light of God's pleasure that transfigures everything, so must we.