

Last Sunday of Epiphany

Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany. This season was originally celebrated in the Church to commemorate the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one of God to the world. In order to prove that Jesus was not just an ordinary man, these early Christians shared the stories of Jesus' baptism and his turning water into wine as evidence of his divinity. As time went by, however, people began saying that Jesus didn't just become the Christ as an adult, he was God's son from birth, so the story of the Magi was introduced and placed on January 6th at the beginning of the season, So now Epiphany begins with the story of Jesus' birth and the visit by the three wise men and then we immediately jump to Jesus' baptism the next week and today we close out the season as we hear about the transfiguration of Jesus – another account to reveal his divine identity.

Our first reading from Exodus sets the stage for us. Then Moses went up to the mountain with his assistant Joshua and the glory of the Lord settled on Mt. Sinai and the cloud covered it for six days. The Israelites viewed clouds as harbingers of life-giving rain and perceived them as an awesome manifestation of the divine power and presence of God. If we would have continued the Exodus account, we would have heard that Moses' face shone after the encounter with God and the almighty voice was heard in the thunder.

These same elements are present in our Gospel which begins, "Six days after Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus took his assistants and led them up a high mountain. There, "he was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun". "Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah", talking with Jesus. And as Peter was asking his question about the tents, "suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

By using these same themes in both readings, Jesus automatically gains stature and prominence by his comparison with Moses who was the most authoritative teacher in the Hebrew Bible and the person who had the closest contact with the Almighty. But then the Gospel goes a step further and says that the voice comes from the cloud and states very clearly that Jesus is the Son of God and that he should be listened to!

Wow! What a dramatic way to culminate the Epiphany season and proclaim once again that Jesus is the Messiah!

What a great scene, but we might ask ourselves, why was it "wasted" on only three people? Why wasn't this great revelation given to the multitudes like the feeding of the 5,000? Why didn't this event happen in front of all the inhabitants of Jerusalem? Wouldn't this have been a better way to convince people that Jesus really was the Son of God? But no, this entire show was given for the benefit of the three disciples and they are ordered not to tell anyone about it.

So, what are these disciples of Jesus going to do with this information? They are going to ponder it so their belief in Jesus as the Christ will increase and when the time is right, they will share this experience with others to help build the community of faith. I

also think that this passage is a good example of God's desire to be intimate with each of us on an individual level.

These three men had been following Jesus around for awhile and they were still trying to figure him out. Was he a teacher, a sage, a prophet, a healer a miracle worker? They struggled with this question and finally Peter acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ – the anointed one of God. But even then, did he really comprehend what that meant? Probably not, so he and the others needed a little more help to gain a clearer understanding.

Isn't this true for us as well? I know I have wrestled with my understanding of who Jesus is and how His identity impacts me. I certainly would like a clearer picture of Jesus too. Wouldn't you? Peter, James and John were given that extra attention and help in understanding Jesus with their experience of the transfiguration. They actually saw and heard these things. Or did they?

At the end of this Gospel passage, Jesus commands the three not to tell anyone of this vision. Scholars tell us that visionary accounts, especially the symbolic and allegorical types, grasp the imagination and evoke feelings in ways that ordinary language cannot. Like poetry, visions present an interpretation of reality and invite the reader or listener to share it. They combine cognitive insight with emotional response. Visions and dreams are closely related phenomena through which secrets are thought to be revealed and things normally hidden from human eyes are revealed.

Have you ever had a vision? How about a dream about God? Or maybe an experience in nature or an encounter with other people where you really "felt" or experienced the presence of God? How did you communicate that experience with others? Or did you? I believe that all of us have such experiences, but how do we share them with our friends, family and with each other?

Here are some common features in the "telling" of visions, dreams and encounters with God:

- Told in the first person
- The individual describes his or her experience
- The setting is given at the beginning
- The date, place and time at which it occurred
- Then follows the content of the vision
- The seer often communicates it by saying "I saw"
- Concludes with how the visionary reacted or what they did immediately afterward

I would like to share with you one such experience I have had in my own life and maybe you can tell me if it was a vision, a dream, or some other type of encounter with the Divine. My experience, however, doesn't involve going up on a mountain and being covered with a cloud.

On Thursday, May 5, 2005 at 8:04 am, my daughter was already at school and I was at work. My wife Laura, however, had just left our house and drove to the end of our street. She stopped for the red light and when it turned green she proceeded to make a turn. Unfortunately, the oncoming person in the SUV didn't stop for his red light and he hit my wife's car broadside, smack in the middle of the driver's door. I was told afterward that Laura died instantly.

A few days after the funeral, when everyone was gone, I found myself struggling with who and where Jesus was. Like the disciples, I was unclear and needed some extra help in understanding Jesus.

I don't know why or what I hoped to see, but I felt compelled to walk down the street to the crash site. It was a beautiful morning, the sun was shining and the birds were singing, just like it was on that fateful day. Everything looked normal, there was no remaining evidence that an accident had occurred there just a few short days before. I looked at my watch, it was 8:10 and the cars continued to drive by. I just stood, not knowing what to do, think or say.

Suddenly, my heart started pounding and I looked up above the traffic lights and what did I see - nothing, except sky and sunshine. But I KNEW at that very moment that this was HOLY GROUND. For this was where Laura met Jesus. The skies had parted and the Son of God was waiting right there to welcome my wife into the kingdom of heaven.

The brightness and the radiance engulfed me. I was frozen, yet my body trembled. The fear was quickly replaced by awe and wonder. I began sobbing as I absorbed the magnitude of God's love and care for Laura. My tears were those of joy and wonder that God so loved Laura that Jesus was sent to escort her home.

My physical eyes saw nothing out of the ordinary, but my spiritual eyes saw the glory of God. This is my Epiphany story. What is yours?