

EPIPHANY V

He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Mark 1 31

Epiphany. The Manifestation. The disclosure of God to the world. We are invited during this season to contemplate God: God's unfathomable greatness and God's infinite goodness.

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in, Isaiah proclaims.

And the psalm: God counts the number of stars and calls them all by their names. / Great is our God and mighty in power;* there is no limit to God's wisdom.*

Isaiah and the psalm offer unfettered praise, doxology at its most exalted.

And yet, great and glorious as God is, God is also in the midst of human life and human endeavor. *God gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and they young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for God shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint, assures Isaiah.*

God lifts up the lowly but casts the wicked to the ground, insists the psalmist.*

And the Gospel from Mark illustrates the power of God plunging Jesus into the messy welter of human need. Simon Peter's mother-in-law is sick; Jesus heals her. As a result of this, apparently, the disciples bring to Jesus everyone in Capernaum who is sick or possessed with demons, and he heals many of them and takes charge of the demons, rendering them powerless. And then, in short order, Jesus goes out and about through Galilee, teaching and preaching and casting out more demons. All in ten short verses!

I don't know about you, but while I find transcendent poetry and glorious inspiration in the visions of God presented by Isaiah and the psalmist, they don't convey how God generally operates in my own life. In theology-speak, we talk of the transcendent God, that's the *God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers*, and the immanent God, the one who *gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless*. Or we talk about encountering God, and Christ vertically— God is up there and we're down here (the grasshoppers) as opposed to

horizontally: we are on the same level, somehow, working shoulder to shoulder to heal the world.

My encounters with God tend to be overwhelmingly immanent and horizontal. I said last week that I've come to recognize that joy in my life is the infallible sign of the presence of God, and that my task is to recognize that joy and acknowledge that that joy is, indeed God. And then what?

Many of you have heard me talk about how I returned to church, as a lonely, depressed, single mother looking to meet people and find community – though I probably couldn't have formed the idea of community back then. I was just lonely, and church was a familiar place of comfort and inspiration – and belonging - from my childhood and youth.

Many of you have also heard me talk about the death of my beloved grandmother who was murdered by burglars. What I don't so often talk about, because it makes such a complicated story, is that two days before my grandmother's murder, a very close friend and godfather to my daughter, Jon, died in a fire in Cambridge. He was thirty. I was huddled with my best friend, my daughter's godmother and Jon's girlfriend, when we got the news about my grandmother.

I will tell you that two traumas of this magnitude are more than twice one. My memories of that time are both vivid and chaotic – traveling back and forth to Maine over and over, planning two funerals in a week, trying to care for my daughter whose third birthday fell the day after Granny's killing. I functioned through all that, somehow, but when the immediate tasks were done, I was in real trouble.

People say that the adrenaline dies down after episodes like these, and that's when the real grieving and depression begin. But for me, the adrenaline didn't die down, and my problem, one of my problems, was what to do with all that unfocused energy. I suspect that now a therapist might say that I was suffering a kind of post-traumatic stress. I couldn't settle down, I couldn't focus, I couldn't eat, and I suspect that I could only sleep with the aid of a couple of stiff bourbons every night – of course I was still drinking then.

I was teaching a couple of courses at the University of Lowell, a long half hour drive from my home. I'd get in the car and cry and scream and pound the steering wheel all the way to Lowell. I'd teach my classes, and then I'd get in the car and cry and scream and pound the steering wheel all the way home. That's when I began running,

exercising in an attempt to exhaust myself. I had all this unfocused energy, physical and emotional.

I remember telling the therapist I did have then that my goal was to be able to sit down on Sunday afternoon and read the **New York Times**. It took me months to achieve that goal.

Up until that point, I'd barely known the rector at my parish. But Jon's funeral was held at the church, and so Dick Martin, the rector, and I spent time with others planning the service. In the midst of that, of course, I told him about my grandmother's death. And he said to me, "When all of this is over, you and I are going to be spending a lot of time together."

And while I would not call Dick Martin a prophet, that was certainly a prophetic statement. I saw him at least as often as I saw my therapist, and he was far more helpful. Not because I was having a crisis of faith, I really wasn't. I never thought God might have caused these dreadful deaths, nor was I angry at God. I was just somewhat untethered, and in acute grief, and Dick guided me through the worst of it with a steady, calm, loving, attentiveness that I came to understand as the essence of priesthood. Dick represented the presence and working of God in my life; accompanying me, sustaining me, and guiding me through the valley of the shadow of death and out the other side.

And as part of that guiding, he did not hesitate to tell me when he thought I was acting badly, acting out, or acting just plain stupid. He told me gently, he told me without judgment, but he did not pull many punches with me. He wanted me to be healed, and for Dick, being healed involved being the best person I could be, emotionally, morally, spiritually. He wanted me to be whole.

And when I was on the other side of the valley of shadow, somewhat on the other side, he began to invite me into the wider community of the parish. I had before these crises, in my pursuit of friendship, joined a ladies' needlework, coffee, and dessert group – and while that did allow me to make the acquaintance of some parishioners, you might imagine that the company was a stretch for my personality. Dick had other ideas. *I'm going to start a single parents' group*, he'd say. *I need you to come to that. And, more and more of these folks are having to deal with divorce in their families. Why don't you do an adult education presentation on divorce? And, you should come to worship committee discussions. And then, I need someone to run the Every Member Canvass. Would you consider that?* He saw my strengths and drew on them, not separating them

from my flaws and vulnerabilities, but helping me to understand myself as an integrated person, and helping me to transform that understanding into service.

Dick was the one to tell me to take a course at seminary, and when I was vacillating about what to choose he said, *take theology. Anyone can read the psalms.* He was the one who backed me in the great Christmas Pageant wars (tradition versus change.) He was the one who got me in to the ordination process, who instructed and mentored me every step of the way. I believe he saw my priesthood in me before I imagined it in myself, and he let nothing get in the way of my achieving my vocation. He was my *soul friend, someone who never allowed me to stray from the path of righteousness without rebuking me and encouraging me at the same time.*

Dick died of cancer less than a year after my ordination to the priesthood – an ordination he was too ill to attend. That was 22 years ago. But not a day goes by that I do not think of him, consult with him in my head and heart, learn from his example and his continuing sustaining presence in my life.

I've preached many sermons about Dick Martin, and I expect I will return to him as long as I'm preaching at all. Because the story of Dick Martin and me is the closest thing I know to the story of Jesus and Simon Peter's mother. *He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.*

What did she serve them? Mark doesn't tell us. Maybe just dinner? And that would be fine. The needlework, coffee, and dessert ladies served our parish in many ways and some of them 30 years later, are still there, God love them. But maybe Simon Peter's mother became one of Jesus' followers, joining the disciples on road trips, telling the story of her healing.

Exactly *what* she did doesn't matter. What matters is that she did *something.* *He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.* Her response to healing, her response to the incarnate, the unmistakable, presence of God in her life was to serve. She began to serve God by serving God's servants, God's instruments in the world, God's messengers of peace and justice, liberation and healing.

And that, I believe, is the Gospel call to all of us, my dear friends. However we experience God in our lives – as transcendent, bedazzling, splendid and magisterial, or as intimate, subtle, personal, operating in the muck and the margins – however we experience God's presence and healing power, the Gospel calls us. Calls us first to hope, to healing and wholeness, and calls us then to service. Exactly what we do doesn't matter

as much as that we do something: something to help to heal the world, something to bring the realm of God a bit closer.

He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen