

WANTING TO WANT TO
Sermon for Epiphany Last B- Mk 9:2-9
LPC, 2/11/18

God acts. That is a major tenet of the Christian faith. Our Holy Scriptures tell us about many, many times that God has acted, and how human beings have responded to God's action. Even our church year reflects the pattern of God's action and human response.

Each of our major seasons begins with a Holy Day, on which we remember God's action, and a season, in which people respond: Christmas and Christmas Season, Epiphany and Epiphany Season, Easter and Easter Season, Pentecost and Pentecost Season. Throughout this cycle, the rhythm of God's action and human response repeats itself.

God acts most spectacularly at Christmas and Easter, the two greatest holy days of the church year. These two actions, the Incarnation of God as Jesus of Nazareth, and the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead are so spectacular, that the average human being has no hope of being able to take in their significance without a chance to get ready for them. So these particular spectacular actions, Christmas and Easter, are the ones which warrant periods of preparation, Advent and Lent.

Here, the last Sunday of Epiphany season, we are on the Epiphany-Lent cusp. We are in what anthropologists and mystics alike tend to call a "liminal state." The term refers to a state of no longer being one thing but not quite another. Our Gospel lesson today reflects that ambiguity.

The event described in today's lesson is known as the Transfiguration. That very name indicates a transition. Plus, the setting is a mountaintop, symbolic in many cultures for obvious reasons as a transitional zone between heaven and earth.

Jesus, who up to this point has been known to his disciples as a natural human being, albeit with miraculous powers, becomes clothed in heavenly light. Then he appears with supernatural beings, Moses and Elijah. Sure Moses and Elijah were at one time natural beings but at the remove of several hundred years from their recorded lifetimes they must now be considered otherworldly. The combined effect on the disciples, we are told, is terrifying.

Now keep this in mind if you've ever wished that God would be plainly manifest to you. If Peter's reaction is any indication, the experience is profoundly disorienting, even literally stupefying.

Parenthetically, this suggests a reason that heaven does not often unambiguously intrude into earthly existence. Scripture shows us again and again that when heaven does break unambiguously into human existence, the results are earth-shaking, catastrophic.

On the other hand, catastrophe has its points. Scripture suggests that once in a very great while the earth can use some shaking, and that God is not above shaking a little earth when God really, really needs to get peoples' attention. And sometimes said catastrophe can only be understood later, within the context of a reality where Jesus Christ is known to have risen from the dead.

Thus, in this story the disciples only understand their experience of Jesus' Transfiguration afterward, after he had risen from the dead. Likewise, there are experiences in our own lives that we can only understand later, when we can relate them to Christ's resurrection, and what that means for our lives.

The catastrophe of Christ's resurrection is that God literally moves heaven and earth to release human beings forever from the power of sin and death, establishing once and for ever that love is the underlying force of the universe.

Do you believe this? That love is a foundational reality for all creation? Be honest. Very few of us, even those of us who call ourselves Christian, can claim with a straight face that we sincerely believe love is the basis of the universe one hundred per cent of the time. There is so much evidence in our lives to the contrary.

It is especially difficult to believe in love as the foundational principle of all reality when bad stuff happens, both on a personal, and on a global scale: when we, or others about whom we care are going through those catastrophes I talked about. Even when we're not in acute catastrophe ourselves, there's just so much bad news coming in from the outside world. It's hard to keep believing in the love that God moved heaven and earth to bring to our attention.

At this point I'm reminded of the prayer of St. Theresa of Avila: "Oh God, I do not love you. I do not want to love you. But how I want to want to love you." Many of us find our own half-hearted attempts to believe and to love reflected in these words. Many of us find comfort in realizing that the greatest of the saints faced the same lukewarm commitments to our faith that we do.

Very few of us will get to the point of having such absolute confidence in the triumph of God's love that we can take catastrophes in stride. But, as St. Theresa suggests, our longing for love to triumph counts. As St. Theresa wanted to want to love, we may not truly believe in the ultimate power of love, or even want to believe in the ultimate power of love. It's so risky to do this, after all, as Jesus' life and death show.

But wanting to want to believe is indeed a sign of God's love beginning to work in us. Wanting to want to believe may even be the image of God, planted in us humans at our creation.

In this liminal period between Epiphany, where God is manifest, and Lent, where we respond to God's action in humility, hold tight to our yearning to love and to believe. For therein lies the beginning of faith. Therein lies truth.