

Transfiguration(s)

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector
at the eleven o'clock service, February 19, 2012.
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany.
Based on 2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9.*

It has not been a quiet week. Syria continued to destabilize as violence there escalated. Our country's political campaigns lurched on, prompting some to wonder—particularly on this Presidents' Day weekend—what this country's founding mothers and fathers might think of our current political goings-on. Same-sex marriage took steps forward in the states of Washington and Maryland; in New Jersey, it took two steps forward, one step back. Whitney Houston's death shocked and saddened us all.

An Asian-American Harvard grad seemed to come out of nowhere to capture the international imagination, as Lin-sanity went global. Then there was the Westminster Dog Show. And Valentine's Day created surprisingly long lines outside Godiva stores on Tuesday evening. There was a huge concert here in this space last night. And today is not only Sunday at St. Bart's, with all that this means, but it's also one of our Welcome Sundays.

There are three special Sundays during the year when we welcome a group of new members during the 11am service. This is our first Welcome Sunday of 2012.

Some churches might avoid scheduling Welcome Sunday on a holiday weekend, fearing that no one would show up. To them I say, "Bah." Not so St. Bart's. In a bold and countercultural move, we scheduled this Welcome Sunday smack in the middle of a holiday weekend. Some two dozen new members have been in touch to let me know they will be here to join this community today. How cool is that? No guts, no glory.

In such an over-the-top week, it has seemed fitting—or a bit much, depending on my mood—to have these two over-the-top Bible stories today: Elijah and Elisha with the chariot and horses of fire and Elijah ascending in a whirlwind into heaven, then appearing almost a thousand years later alongside Moses as Jesus is transfigured on a mountaintop, with Peter, James and John looking on in completely understandable terror and confusion.

To have these two "colorful" stories on a day when we're welcoming new members into St. Bart's, into the Episcopal Church, into Church at all . . . well, it feels a bit like having some of your most outrageous, rather embarrassing family stories trotted out the first time you bring your fiancé(e) home to meet the family. Uh-oh. What will they think? Will they stay, or will they run screaming from the house/church? Will they try to slip politely away during the dessert/sermon?

Even long-time members may feel an impulse to do either of those. Or, perhaps having heard these stories many times over the years, the greater temptation for long-timers is to zone out for a while, to "go to the beach."

If you're a newcomer, you may be wondering, "My goodness, if we join, what are we getting into? Do we have to believe these stories?" Or maybe you're thinking, "This is just a myth—it never really happened. It doesn't mean anything for us today." Stay with me for a minute. I believe there is something here of value when we try to walk between the extremes of taking these stories literally and dismissing them outright.

I spoke recently with a friend of mine, who happens to be a professor of theology. She posed the questions: How is it that people of our time can recover the ability and imagination to hear these stories other than literally? How can we re-learn how to hear and understand these stories as relevant for us?

Mark's community would have known these stories and traditions in the same way we know our stories of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Mark's community would have known this ancient story of Elijah, the great prophet and leader of the people of Israel, second only to Moses. Joshua, Moses' successor, took over from Moses to lead the people, after their forty years in the wilderness, into the Promised Land. Elijah is a new Moses, and Elisha is his Joshua. Elisha inherits the mantle of leadership when it is time for Elijah to leave, which Elijah seems to have done in a very unusual way.

Whatever else they may be, both the Elijah-Elisha and the Transfiguration stories capture moments of change, turning points in history. We at St. Bart's know something about change. We have just experienced our own version of the Elijah-Elisha story: the mantle of our leadership has been passed from one person to another in an admittedly unusual way. Our longtime leader left less than a month ago in a blaze of glory, which at times did feel like a whirlwind. Chairs of fire and a platform of fire separated the two of them.

Elijah and Moses appear with Jesus—a transfigured Jesus—in this mountaintop scene in Mark's gospel. The Transfiguration, as this scene is called, is a very big deal in our tradition. It's a major feast day of the

Church. It's been a frequent subject of art over the years. In fact, it's very much a part of St. Bart's; every time we're in this space, we see the Transfiguration in this magnificent mosaic over our high altar. You can see Jesus there, robed in white, with Moses (holding the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments) and Elijah, along with Peter and James and John.

What does this Transfiguration story mean? Did it really happen? I have to admit taking comfort in the fact that, as Mark tells it, even Jesus' inner circle struggled to figure out what it meant. None of us can say with absolute authority or correctness exactly what happened there. But something happened . . . something that made such a difference to Mark's community that Mark tried to capture it in this story, at once mystical and practical.

Sometimes we too experience that which that goes beyond words. Heaven knows, if you've ever experienced anything like what's described here, you're very careful whom you tell about it. I relate to Peter—plainly terrified, so shaken up that he babbles, then suggests, “Hey, let's pitch some tents and stay for a while so we can process what just happened here.”

Our word "transfiguration" comes from a Greek word from which we also get the word "metamorphosis," both having to do with being changed or transformed. When I hear “metamorphosis,” I think of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. That kind of transfiguration involves the same being, permanently changed in body and appearance. Mark's transfiguration scene is different. It is temporary, giving a momentary glimpse into a deep reality, a deep truth—a deep truth about who Jesus really is.

Have you ever witnessed a transfiguration?

Have you ever seen the face of someone who's just fallen in love? Their face shines and glows, their eyes sparkle, their very skin appears different. In this changed appearance, a deep reality, a deep truth, is being revealed. So much so that even strangers at the next table will remark, “You can always tell when two people are in love.”

You can see transfiguration in the faces of couples during their wedding ceremony, as they see each other for the first time, as they gaze at each other during the service, as they turn and walk (often with palpable relief that everything went well and nobody messed up) back down the aisle, glowing with happiness.

I've seen transfiguration in the face of a mother or a father holding their newborn child for the first time. Or in the face of a mother or a father beholding their child for the zillionth time, even if that child has wrecked the car or strewn cereal all over the kitchen again. I see it in the face of almost any grandparent.

I've seen it, too, in the face of one spouse, married for more years than I've been alive and having weathered a lifetime of ups and downs together, visibly brightening and glowing when their partner enters the room.

To be fair, I think transfiguration can work the other way, too. It can break your heart to see the face of someone you care about collapse with grief, or go rigid with stress, or go gray and vacant and flat from depression.

Each of these is a momentary glimpse. Life returns to “normal,” whatever that may be. The glow of being in love morphs into everyday companionship or separate paths. The wedding couple returns to work schedules and bills and what to have for dinner and in-laws. The new parents deal with diapers and feedings and drastically less sleep. Those in grief or stress or depression struggle on, finding help where they can.

Each of these transfigurations is temporary, but it is absolutely real in that each one reveals a deep underlying reality, a deep truth. If we have eyes to see and hearts to hear, we are there to behold each other's transfigurations. In that beholding, each of us becomes more than we have been.

That's what can happen in a community like this, a community where we are not perfect but where all are welcome, where we all gather around the table and dare to be transfigured.

Belonging to this community, thankfully, isn't about believing our sacred stories as some kind of litmus test of faith. It's about finding and offering the spaciousness for questions and doubt and differences.

It's about treating each other—and every human being—with dignity and respect.

It's about coming to understand that the deepest transfiguration of all is to realize who you are, and whose you are.

It's about growing the eyes and heart it takes to behold another's transfiguration and your own, and the humility to let it change you.

Beholding—and holding—each other's transfigurations is a holy thing indeed.

Amen.

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