



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Epiphany, Times Square, and Veils

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 10, 2013*

*The Last Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Based on 2 Corinthians 3:12-42 and Luke 9:28-36*

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. The gospel reading for this Sunday is always the Transfiguration story. This year we have Luke's version, which culminates in God's voice proclaiming, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

Does this sound like "déjà-vu all over again"? We heard almost those same words just a few weeks ago, on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, when we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord. On that Sunday, we heard Luke's version of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan, which ends with these words: "The Holy Spirit descended upon [Jesus] in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

That was just a few weeks ago, January 13 to be exact. The season of Epiphany always starts on January 6, but ends when Lent begins (this Wednesday, February 13). Because the date of Easter shifts, the dates of Lent shift. So the season of Epiphany is short or long, depending on whether Easter is early or late. For the record, I'd like to observe one more time how short this season of Epiphany has been! The staff is still huffing and puffing after jogging from Christmas to Lent with barely a breath.

The Season of Epiphany, this season of light, seems to me this year like an arc—an arc of light—with God's voice on either end like blinking neon signs with arrows, pointing to Jesus . . . this is my Son!

In between those two blinking neon signs, we have epiphanies, manifestations, striking revelations telling us who Jesus really is. Do you remember? There was the wedding at Cana, involving (in our terms) 900 bottles—that's 75 cases—of really good wine. There was Jesus turning into a bit of a superstar in the synagogue with "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Then the crowd attempted to throw Jesus off a cliff, whereupon he made what sounded like a miraculous escape.

So . . . Epiphany has this arc of lights with blinking arrows at either end, and in between a lot of wine, some high-octane shows, attempted murder, and a miraculous escape. Well, to me this year Epiphany began to look and sound a lot like Times Square.

If these ancient writers had had neon lights, they'd have used them to make their points. Instead, they write of doves descending and faces shining like the sun, of dazzling white clothes and glory.

In our lectionary, we get the Transfiguration story once a year. But at St. Bart's we have it every day, 365 days a year, because it's right here in this incredible mosaic over our apse. The mosaic was done by Hildreth Meière (1892-1961), one of the best-known and most prolific Art Deco muralists of the twentieth century. I remember reading that she used over 200 different colors of gold mosaics, which is what makes them appear to sparkle.

This scene so beautifully shown in our apse is exactly the one the gospel writers are trying to paint with words. The meaning of the scene . . . ah, that's the deeper question. What are they trying to say it means? And what does it mean to us?

I think we find some clues in our other reading, from Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians.

As I studied and prayed these scriptures over these past weeks, I found myself drawn again and again to Paul's image of a veil. Now that could be the work of the Holy Spirit. Or it could be the influence of Downton Abbey and those fabulous hats. Or both. But there it is—the veil.

When Paul refers to "Moses, who put a veil over his face," he's referring to the story in the Hebrew Scriptures (which the Corinthians would have known and which we know, too) of Moses' going up the mountain at Sinai, where he met with God. When Moses came down the mountain from those meetings, Moses' face shone brightly because he had been in the presence of God. In fact, his face shone so brightly that he had to wear a veil until the reflected glory faded, in order to keep the brightness from scaring or blinding the people. Moses was like a live high-voltage wire . . . you don't just go up and touch it . . . it's too much to handle.

You can hear the echoes in Luke's account of the Transfiguration—up on the mountain (code for encountering God), the cloud, dazzling white clothes, the appearance of Jesus' face changing. All these clearly recall Moses' experience at Sinai. There is a connection between the two stories.

Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt in the Exodus, God's great liberation event of the Hebrew Scriptures. For Luke particularly, Jesus' "departure" (Greek: *exodos*) is God's great liberation event of the Christian scriptures. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God acts to bring life and freedom to all of us—not to one group, but to *all*.

Moses' veil was understood to be protective. But, Paul says, now God's presence has been revealed in a new way, in such a way that we can look upon God's face and not be struck dead or electrocuted. A way, in fact, that when we look upon it brings life, not death. Looking upon this glory of God, as seen in the face of Jesus, as evidenced through the Spirit, is not only life-giving, Paul says—it's also transformative.

I use that word "transformative" with great caution. I find the words "transform" and "transformation" to be rather over-used. Particularly in church circles they've become something of a cliché. How many church websites and church books tout "transformation" as a goal? I always want to ask them . . . transformed into *what*?

Paul is writing not to an individual but to a group of people, to the church in Corinth, in fact—a church he himself had "planted" years before. Paul is writing to those Corinthians, those Christians behaving badly, who have already caused Paul a lot of trouble and heartache. Surely God wants nothing to do with such a fractious and arrogant bunch; surely God couldn't and wouldn't work through them.

But no . . . Paul tells the Corinthians that, in spite of themselves, God *is* actively at work within them, changing them, transforming them from glory into glory . . . *i.e.*, into the likeness of Christ. The likeness of Christ doesn't necessarily mean an easy, comfortable life or fame and fortune. Jesus' "departure" will be to Jerusalem.

Paul is not expressing his faith in the Corinthian church's ability to change itself, but rather in the Spirit's working within it. Even within the Corinthian church, God's spirit is working. That is the hope Paul is referring to.

If the season of Epiphany is the Times Square of the church year, then the season of Lent would be . . . what? . . . a wilderness area in the Adirondacks? Or at least the North Woods of Central Park.

So here we are on this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, about to leave the lights and action of Times Square for a quieter place, a place with fewer lights but no fewer temptations.

Interesting that Luke's account never actually uses the word "transfiguration," even in the Greek. Interesting, too, that it's the only one of the gospel accounts of this story to include the detail that Jesus went up the mountain to pray. I believe that's a helpful image as we prepare to enter the season of Lent. What if you and I consider Lent as a time to "go up the mountain to pray"? To take some time and space, whenever and wherever we can, to withdraw a bit from the lights and action of our lives.

What if we take some time to ponder what veils we may be wearing, and why? A veil can serve different purposes. A veil can protect. A veil can hide, deceive. A veil can allure. Which veils might we be wearing, and—even more importantly—why are we wearing them?

What if we take some time in the quiet and space, to listen, and see what—or whom—we hear?

What if we take some time to consider where we may have seen or experienced the glory of God? Doing that may help us see and experience the glory of God going forward.

It just may be that when we go up the mountain to pray, we discover anew how God is working within us, changing us, transforming us bit by bit into the image of Christ.

It just may be that when we go up the mountain to pray, we catch a glimpse of how God is working within this community of St. Bart's (even us!), how God may be changing us, transforming us as a church more and more into the image of Christ.

It just may be.

Amen.

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