



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Reverend Deborah A. Lee,
Associate Rector for Discipleship & Community Life

Strengthened to Serve

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 14, 2021
The Last Sunday After Epiphany
Based on 2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9*

Let us pray: Gracious God, shine in our hearts today and give us the light of the knowledge of your glory, through our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. It has been quite a journey as we've made our way through the Gospel narratives of the past several weeks. We began with the manifestation of the divine nature of the Christ child to the three wise men. We then witnessed Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River and God's confirmation of his sonship. Then Jesus began to call his disciples together and accomplish acts of miraculous healing, proclaiming the message of the Gospel in synagogues and casting out demons. Today we end with a bang, with Christ appearing in radiant glory on the mountain. Our readings today from the Second Book of Kings and the Gospel of Mark are just dazzling, two of the most beautiful stories in scripture: Elijah's ascent to heaven and Jesus' transfiguration.

These are mystical, magical stories where heaven and earth meet in an extraordinary fashion.

These are empyrean stories, grounded in the eternal; and at the same time, these stories are profoundly human, speaking of love, loss, grief, and the transformational nature of one's journey of faith.

Just picture it—ninth century B.C. Elisha realizes that his mentor, guide, and confidant isn't going to be around forever. Gripped with enormous separation anxiety, he seems to want to remain in denial about Elijah's impending departure. Twice, he dismisses the words of the prophets who encourage him to get ready to face the fact that Elijah's would soon be leaving him. Distressed and anguished, we can imagine him plugging his ears and telling the prophets, "Please, enough—I don't want to hear any more about it!" In sympathy, we can certainly understand Elisha—how the thought of Elijah not being with him would devastate him to his core, his mentor's death just too much for him to bear. Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of the same spirit that empowered his extraordinary mentor before Elijah is taken away, and although bathed in his grief, Elisha eventually picks up the mantle that belonged to Elijah, and is strengthened to serve.

Now, let's fast forward to first century A.D. and the setting for today's Gospel narrative. After Jesus predicts his death to his disciples, they are shaken. Peter even rebukes Jesus for uttering what was, in Peter's mind, sheer blasphemy! It seemed unimaginable and inconceivable that Jesus, the one for whom they left everything and everyone else to follow, would leave his disciples. Just as Elisha felt doubt and panic regarding Elijah's departure, the disciples, upon hearing that Jesus would not be with them for much longer, are filled with distress, and pondering Jesus' death seems just too much to bear. Soon after

this, Jesus leads James, Peter and John “up a high mountain apart, by themselves,” and the three disciples are transported into a world of deeper vision. What they see astonishes them, as Jesus is transfigured in brilliant light right before their very eyes.

James, Peter, and John stood in the presence of God incarnate and witnessed Jesus in all his majesty and glory. This was the unmistakable revelation of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, assuring them that he was indeed the Messiah.

Poet W.H. Auden, commenting on the miraculous event, wrote:

“Christ did not enchant men; He demanded that they believe in Him: except on one occasion, the Transfiguration. For a brief while, Peter, James, and John were permitted to see Him in His glory. For that brief while they had no need of faith. [Then] the vision vanished, and the memory of it did not prevent them from all forsaking Him when He was arrested, or Peter from denying that he had ever known Him.”¹

Although, in their fear and terror, the disciples abandoned Christ at the hour of his arrest, they would never forget the experience on that mountain. And afterwards, being renewed by the Holy Spirit, they would go on to be powerful teachers of Christ’s gospel and continue his mission in the world. They were strengthened to serve.

Now, let’s fast forward once more to the early 19th century and to one final illustration and faith journey. Yesterday, February 13th, the Episcopal Church marked the 203rd anniversary of the death of Absalom Jones, who died in 1818. Jones, the first Black Episcopal priest of the Church, was ordained in 1802.

He was a pioneer of religion, social action and transformation. Born into slavery, he taught himself to read using the New Testament, since an opportunity for formal schooling was not available to him. After purchasing his freedom at the age of 38, Jones, a devout Methodist at the time, worshiped at St. George’s Methodist Church, one of a few churches in Philadelphia that opened its door to African Americans. Yet as the Black population of the congregation increased, racial tensions began to flare.

One Sunday morning, while Absalom was kneeling in prayer at the altar rail, a church trustee demanded that he and the other Black congregants withdraw themselves from the main sanctuary and go to a segregated section upstairs, relegating them to the “slave gallery” in the church they had helped to build. When Absalom Jones refused to interrupt his prayers, the trustee attempted to forcibly remove him. For this racist mistreatment, the entire membership of African Americans walked out of St. George’s, vowing never to return. But Jones was undeterred. Several years later he, along with preacher Richard Allen, helped inaugurate the African Methodist Episcopal (or, AME) church. Jones later left Methodism and decided to affiliate with the Episcopal Church and the Diocese of Pennsylvania, and was ordained in 1802.

He faithfully served God and the people of the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas in Philadelphia as prophet, pastor and social activist until his death.

Absalom Jones needed resilience to endure and to withstand the temptation to allow slavery to define him. He needed the courage to not abhor his oppressors and those who would try to deny his humanity and denigrate his human dignity, even when those who would oppose him came from within the Church. But it was his unwavering devotion to God’s Word that allowed his faith and courage to remain steadfast. Jones knew who he was, that he belonged to God, and was one of God’s beloved in Christ, in whom God was well pleased. The temptation to forget this truth in the face of adversity was no doubt strong, but God’s truth was stronger, and thus Jones was strengthened to serve.

Elisha. Peter. James. John. Absalom. Their faith journeys were strengthened in order to serve the God who had called them into mission. Each one was called to walk into uncharted territory. Each one faced the unfamiliar and the unknown.

What fortifies and strengthens us to serve today? We have all at times felt unsure of ourselves and of our capabilities to carry out something God has called us to do. As we confront our fears, we can confidently stand on God's truth. Scripture tells us that God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power and love, (2 Timothy 1:7), and that if we feel we lack the wisdom needed to move forward with assurance, we can ask God for that wisdom, who gives generously to all (James 1:5). For the plans God has for us are to prosper us and to give us a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11) through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

May the stories of Jesus' transfiguration, Elijah and Elisha and Absalom Jones illuminate our faith journey, strengthen us to serve, and cause us to grasp onto the truth that God, who began a good work within us, will continue that work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns (Philippians 1:6).

Amen.

¹ W.H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*, The Viking Press, 1970; <https://thinkandletthink.com/tag/wh-auden/>

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022