

SPG#155, Last Epiphany A

February 3, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

During Epiphany we encounter many bright lights. When Jesus was baptized a light shone on him, and then a voice from heaven. At the conversion of the apostle Paul a blinding light confronted him on the way to Damascus. Today, in the Old Testament lesson, we visit Moses again at the burning bush. And finally, in today's gospel, we witness Jesus transfigured before Peter, James, and John. His face, Matthew says, is like the sun, his clothes dazzling white. Preachers who write sermons on the Transfiguration mostly agree that the text presents significant difficulties when one is trying to write a sermon. For one thing, how does one approach a happening such as the Transfiguration?

Should we treat it as some kind of natural phenomena like the Northern Lights? Even if we give our consideration over to objective examination, and objectively note geographical location, the cultural genre of the day, the political atmosphere of the day, and how the Greek language is used to present the story, it is possible, and probably even predictable that we would sense something missing.

Last summer, as I took Leah back to school in Indiana, we stopped at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Illinois. It is quite an impressive display with lifelike wax figures of Lincoln and his family, political figures of the day, and other individuals. The museum is laid out in different directions from a central atrium. In the center are wax figures of the Lincoln family to welcome you. In one direction from the atrium one passes through a replica of the front of the White House.

Behind that façade are different scenes of the White House years and the Civil War. In another direction is a log cabin where Lincoln grew up. In still another direction is a show on Presidential museums. The use of technology to depict scenes is quite impressive.

I was impressed and even moved by some of the scenes that I saw. But I cannot say that my life was changed because I had been there. And I would not call what I saw an epiphany.

I have told many of you of my experience at the William McKinley Presidential museum in Canton, Ohio. McKinley and his wife, Ida, are buried under a huge dome there.

Part of the museum is a parlor of McKinley era furniture. Visitors walk the length of the room behind a low rail. I was alone that day in the museum. And as I walked through that parlor I noticed two wax figures in the corner of McKinley, who was standing, and his wife, Ida, sitting in a rocking chair. They looked quite lifelike for wax figures I thought. And as I approached that end of the room, they began to move. McKinley turned toward me, looked at me with his eyes, and as his face registered surprise he said,

“Ida, we have guests!” She also turned to look right at me and said, “Yes, we do.!”

They were computer animated wax figures, probably via Disney technology. Will I ever forget that day? No way. But was it an epiphany? I think not.

If you travel to the Holy Land, you will not find a Transfiguration National Park built around where the Transfiguration occurred. Scholars are not in agreement where it actually occurred.

There is some consensus that it occurred somewhere north of the Sea of Galilee. There is still argument over which mountain was the one referred to as Sinai where Moses stood before the burning bush. Archaeologists can indicate the area where they think the Apostle Paul encountered the bright light of Christ on his way to Damascus.

In addition, there is no commentary that occurs with the stories that attempts to explain or expand upon what happened.

So it appears that our cool objectivity can only take us so far in our appreciation of the event. However, there is conversation and voices that occur within the epiphanies of the burning bush, on the road to Damascus, and the Transfiguration. And that is helpful.

In the Transfiguration Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, talking with him about his going to Jerusalem where he will be betrayed, persecuted, and killed. In the burning bush God speaks to Moses. Out of the light of Christ on the way to Damascus, Saul hears a voice. So, along with the fantastic in each of these accounts is a personal note.

In the burning bush, in Moses' conversations with God, he came to know God personally.

The same is true for Paul and his blinding light. For along with it being a fantastic occurrence, it was also deeply personal. And the same is true for the Transfiguration.

For the disciples saw their friend Jesus talking with people whom they had heard about all their lives, Moses and Elijah.

Because of the mix of the personal and the fantastic the people involved in each of these epiphanies came away with something out of the experience that changed their lives. Moses would lead his people out of bondage.

Saul would become the Apostle Paul. Peter, James, and John would live with Jesus through all that he went through in Jerusalem to become apostles themselves.

I daresay that all of them did not just encounter a forceful teaching. I daresay that they were not just awestruck by some incredible phenomenon. Rather, personally and incredibly, they were changed.

There is every indication that each of these carried their experience with them from that day in their hearts. I expect they would refer to it again and again. And so the unstated truth of the Transfiguration, for example, is the inner effect it had on Peter, James, and John. Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross writes of an inner spiritual journey he calls "The Ascent to Mt. Carmel." Paradoxically his ascent is really an inner descent into what is most personal in a human being as they search for union with God.

For Peter, James, and John all that they had heard about the coming of the Messiah in their Jewish faith was confirmed as they were overwhelmed by the light of Christ, and as they saw him talking with the prophets.

And so it is, via the Word of God, that we stand before this transfigured, shining Jesus.

And He is on fire with the glory of God. And his presence may cause us to ask questions of ourselves. What will I take away from the experience of Epiphany into Lent? How does the presence of the transfigured Christ affect me?

In our Ascent to Mt. Carmel, in our heart of hearts there are many deep human questions that are written there for us to answer. In your life you are the only one who can answer them. And within the story of the Transfiguration we will find the tools to do so.

Biblical scholar Bruce Chilton says that first century followers had a good appreciation of the fantastic in their lives. And he says if we had such an appreciation the answers to our deep human questions would be more forthcoming.

Last Friday night, as I slept, I saw a huge black bird, like a crow, sitting next to a huge white bird, who seemed somehow bored. They were both sitting on what looked like an ice floe in the middle of the ocean. Then I saw the big black one coming toward me.

I sensed danger and became afraid. I knew I needed to protect myself, so I began to lash out. Then I heard a “Stop. Stop!” And I realized I was kicking my wife.

What did it mean? I do not know. But I have such dreams, and other ones, all the time.

If there were some of you who also admitted such experience, or if some of us were willing to open ourselves more to the possibility of visionary experience, and talk about it, then I would not need to confine the sharing of my dreams to careful wording in a sermon. Plus, as we used to say, I would worry less about the “men in white coats.”

I think it was that willingness toward dreams and visions that had Peter, James, and John realizing something new about Jesus and something new about themselves.

And that is the other side of the story of the Transfiguration. And that is the way it goes in knowing Christ. The more space we allow him in our lives, the more he will fill that space with revelation, with meaning, with purpose. As we stand on the brink of Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season, the issue of how much space in our lives we will allow for Christ is crucial.

Because if we allow for the transfigured Christ in Epiphany, then we will know more in Lent how to prepare for the risen Christ. May the lessons of Epiphany be written on our hearts and in our lives.

Amen.