

Last Sunday after Epiphany Year A  
Matthew 17:1-9  
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Shakespeare's plays were, I guess I would say, conical in shape. The action of the first two acts builds up to the climax in the third act; what follows in the fourth and fifth acts is the natural – even inevitable – result of that climax. Though no one ever does this, if we were to imagine the time from Epiphany to Easter as one big Shakespearean drama, today, the last Sunday after Epiphany, the Sunday prior to the start of Lent, would be the climax. Everything that happened from January 6<sup>th</sup> on leads us to the revelation that is before us today. Everything that follows from this moment until Easter follows naturally from what we witness today.

Every word, every image in this passage is rooted in the Bible, and it all comes together to make a single declaration. The mountain top setting, the presence of Elijah and Moses, the transformation of Jesus in which his face “shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white,” all demonstrate that in Jesus the whole meaning and purpose of the Law and the Prophets has now been revealed and fulfilled. There is from this point on no turning back, the claim, being demonstrated, must now be lived out and demonstrated to the world in story, miracle and argument, and that claim will be rejected by most who will see in Jesus not just a bad or ineffective messiah, but no messiah at all.

Because of this, Jesus declares at the end of this passage, he will die at the hands of those who cannot understand what has happened. But because in him the whole meaning of God's Covenant with the Jews has now burst the bonds of one particular religion and includes not just the Jews – still very much part of the covenant - but also the whole world, he will not stay dead, but will rise from the grave in testimony to the power of God not just over life, but over death itself.

I have put things way because this morning I want to do what I just said no one does, imagine the time from Epiphany to Easter as a play by Shakespeare, with this moment as the climax. I want to do one other thing as well, cast us all as the actors in that play. At some point in all our lives we were made aware of Jesus, in my case it was from birth, and that will be true for many of you here as well, but not for everyone. One way or another we are here today because some Epiphany sort of event occurred. It wasn't necessarily a single moment; more commonly it takes the form of a long trajectory in which we live within the faith of others for a time, gradually, as with the season after Epiphany, learning more and more about this faith.

At some point that faith stops being rooted entirely in what others have said and done and told us, and becomes ours, rooted in our own experience. It becomes in some significant way the means by which we understand ourselves the world and our place in it. That moment, whether it takes place over years, as is the case with most of us, or happens in a moment or two of time, which is very much more rare, is the point at which we find ourselves today. I remember mine

very clearly; perhaps I have mentioned it before. An aged professor of history at the University of Oregon began his first lecture in “Radicalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries” by quoting the Confession of sin as it appears in the morning prayer service of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Suddenly the bizarre way the world works, and the relationship of Christianity to it, became clear. The world works the way it does because we don’t know what we are doing. We are constantly doing what shouldn’t be doing, and leaving out what we should be. Our own self-interest – both individually and collectively – makes it not just hard, but impossible for societies and people to see the world as God sees it.

Over time this got filled in with more detail. Christianity is not primarily a *prescription* for certain types of behavior, it is a *description* of the human condition. The purpose of evangelism is not to convince people to believe in Jesus or face the fires of hell, the purpose of evangelism is to acquaint people with the truth of their own situation in the cosmos. God’s job is not to make us experience subjective feelings one way or the other, it is to tell us the objective truth, which is that we can’t overcome or transcend ourselves. But regardless of how my faith developed subsequently, it was in that moment that the faith I had inherited from my parents and my culture became my own faith, rooted in my own experience and, this faith became the way I have interpreted both myself and the world ever since.

For me, that moment was the moment celebrated today as the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It was my moment when with Peter and James and

John I saw the transfigured Christ and was transformed by the vision. In the development of my own faith, I was able, in the words of Robert Hunter, to “see here how everything lead up to this day.” And since then everything has flowed from it. I can trace my own developing vocation to the priesthood to that moment. I can trace the way my theological understanding grew, I can point to that moment as the moment when I stopped being a liberal because my parents were, and started being a Hamiltonian sort of Democrat, who could not ever become a libertarian because I realized that though I can trust God, my faith makes it impossible for me to trust the native instincts and good will of people to provide “liberty and justice for all.” Therefore a government so carefully structured that it creates incentives for all to work together for the common good is indeed “the last best hope of earth.” My mountaintop, oddly enough, was that tie-dyed, birkenstocked, Grateful Dead loving, pot smoking, war protesting spot on the Willamette River known as the University of Oregon.

I believe that everyone here either has that same mountaintop in your own past, or that you are even now on the way up that mountain. If you can look back upon your own life and see that moment - and maybe it wasn't a moment - but rather the cumulative effect of many moments, many experiences, when your faith became not just something you inherited from your parents or culture, but your very own faith, rooted in your very own life and experience, if you can spot the moment, or even that era in your life when you began to interpret the world from the perspective of that faith which had become truly

yours, then you know the moment you too saw the transfigured Christ. If you can't spot that moment – which again may be a year or a decade, an event or a whole series of events spread out over time – worry not, fear not; all that means at most is that you are still on the way up that mountain, still somewhere in the first two acts of that Shakespeare play which is the story of the movement from Epiphany to Easter in your life.

Next week this drama moves into its *denouement* as we begin Lent. I'll end with a single observation that will perhaps get more attention later on. The mountaintop where we behold the transfigured Jesus in whatever manner, and over however much time that takes, does not make life easier, does not make us richer or necessarily even happier. On the contrary, it might just make life harder, as looking at the world from the perspective of a faith that is now truly your own will likely draw you into the lives of other people you might never have otherwise known. It will, as the movement of the drama demonstrates, draw forth from you more compassion for others than you thought you had, and that will make you suffer more than you would have if you had never become an actor in this drama. It might also lead you to spend money on people, and places and causes you would not have considered. And as well, discovering the way people make each other suffer, often believing that they are doing exactly the right thing, might make you discontent, rather than contented, less happy, rather than more happy. All of these possibilities grow from that moment on the mountain, all of them are demonstrated over and over again not just in the pages

of the gospel, but in the lives of people we know who have been on that mountaintop and have seen in their own ways, the transfigured Jesus.

As the final two acts of the drama, Lent will show us that the actors in this play, all of us, did not get our roles in order that we might contrive to make God serve us. We have our roles that we might serve God, and that through us God will serve the world. In this play we will discover that this is where we all find the true meaning of our lives, and the very purpose of our existence, a meaning and a purpose that, in Jesus, brings about the final victory of life by transcending death itself.