

Listen to him: Last Sunday of Epiphany, Yr. B; Mark 9:2-9; 2 Kings 2:1-12

We've come to the last Sunday of Epiphany. Have you had yours yet? I think I waited in vain for an epiphany in preparing this homily. And you may agree by the time I finish.

Epiphanies range from small and insignificant to life changing. Did you ever say, "I finally put 2 and 2 together" or "The pieces fell in place" or "That's who that is!" or, "I finally saw the light." Small insights when something "clicked" for you, but epiphanies none the less. I love the phrase, "an ah-ha moment" to describe these experiences. But epiphanies can be life changing.

In my 73 years, I've had only one religious epiphany, when in a time of turmoil and distress, I suddenly had the realization that God was walking with me and always would be. No bells or whistles or mountain top. But a moment I have never forgotten.

Epiphany in the church concerns a more momentous manifestation, particularly the manifestation of Jesus to the three wise men and to Gentiles.

The last Sunday of Epiphany is celebrated, as every Sunday is, as a Feast of our Lord, but also as the Feast of the Transfiguration, a day that trumps all other days of commemoration or special observance that might fall on that Sunday. When we celebrate The Feast of the Transfiguration, we know the next week will include Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday and the beginning of our Lenten journey.

But what is the Transfiguration? Was the Transfiguration an event that could have been recorded by cell phone video, an event that occurred in our time and space? The three Synoptic Gospels have virtually identical accounts of the Transfiguration. Jesus appeared on a mountain top in dazzling white in the company of Elijah and Moses. The disciple Peter startled enough to blurt out: Teacher, it is good for us to be here; lets make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. A voice from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And coming down the mountain, Jesus telling the disciples to tell no one about this experience until after the Son of Man had been raised from the dead.

Sure, the whole event could have been captured on a cell phone.

A second explanation would be that the Transfiguration, rather than an account of an historical event, is a story the writers of the three Gospels included to establish Jesus' credentials. Moses was for the Israelites was the greatest prophet, so in the Transfiguration story, Jesus has his mountain top experience to match Moses' Mt. Sinai experience.

In our OT reading, Elijah did not die but rather went to heaven in a windstorm. The Tanakh, the Jewish scriptures, says in the book of the prophet Malachi : "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day the Lord comes", a passage regularly recited in Jewish Sabbath worship to this day.

So the Transfiguration story was perhaps included to show how the prophesied return of Elijah was fulfilled. After the Transfiguration experience, in the Gospel of Mark, the disciples ask Jesus if Elijah was not to come before the messiah, and Jesus responded, "In fact, I tell you that Elijah has come, but they did to him whatever they wanted, just as it was written about him." Jesus in chapter 11 of the Gospel of Matthew identifies John the Baptizer as the Elijah who would precede the coming of the Messiah.

I suggest that whether the account of the Transfiguration is a factual account or a made-up account, makes little real difference; either way the story carries the same

meaning: Jesus was the long expected messiah. The writer of Mark, structuring his gospel to explain who Jesus was, put the Transfiguration account at the center point of the Gospel.

The context of the Transfiguration in Mark helps us understand the Gospel writer's plan. Thus, in the chapter preceding today's gospel reading, Jesus asks the disciples about what people were saying about who Jesus is. After they gave various answers, which included John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, Jesus asked, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am?" Peter responded, "You are the Christ." Then Jesus began to teach the disciples saying: "The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead." Peter immediately took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned and facing the disciples sternly corrected Peter: "Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

In this context the words from the voice in a cloud make more sense: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

Jesus was an historical figure who lived in first century Palestine. That is not the question. Rather the question Jesus asks us what we say the meaning, the significance, of Jesus is, not for history, for the Church, for your priest or your neighbor, but for ourselves.

The words heard from the cloud, "This is my son, the beloved; listen to him" do pose a challenge. The claim to be the son of a god was held widely by rulers of various kingdoms. And Jesus' teachings and actions were out of synch with what the Israelites expected from their Messiah. This is apparent from Peter's response that Jesus was the Anointed one and then immediately rebuking Jesus for saying he would be crucified. For Peter a crucified anointed one would not be much of a Messiah. Nor are Jesus' actions and values any more popular today. No emperors or kings or politicians were, or are, eating openly with sinners and tax collectors, or urging us to prepare for the coming Kingdom of God, or calling for the poor to be favored over the rich. Listening to Jesus will have consequences.

There are many answers to the question of the significance of Jesus for us personally: Jesus was a person of no importance, or a much admired 1st century prophet; he is God or the son of God, the redeemer of the world, the forgiver of our sins, the ultimate expression of love, the Head of the Church, your personal savior, and on and on.

I think the beginning of our answer must be the final words spoken out of the cloud at the conclusion of the account of the Transfiguration: Listen to him. Not listen to what others say, but listen to what Jesus says to us both through his words and actions. Then we can form our response.

The answer that works for me is an old term, certainly out of fashion in the 21st Century: Jesus is my Lord. For me "Lord" expresses the one to whom I give my ultimate allegiance; the one I try to follow; the one who shapes my life, my values, my hopes.

For me, it is not really a matter of what I believe, but rather, to what or to whom I commit my life; who guides what I do as I walk into the world. What I do, not what I say. That person is my Lord.

AMEN

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[Unless otherwise noted, scripture quoted in this homily is taken from the Common English Bible]