

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Epiphany Last-C; 3 March 2019**  
**St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster**

**A Lenten Epiphany**

*In nomine...*

*When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

**I. Intro**

Have you ever had your phone or computer freeze up because you were demanding too much of it? First it gets very slow, then you get the little “thinking icon” or spinning beach ball and then, “poof.” You get a blank screen. In Windows they call it the Blue Screen of Death. You overtax your computer and it just shuts down. As computers have gotten faster and operating systems more robust, they seem to do this less. But it still happens.

I was fascinated, as a new parent, to discover that the same thing happens to babies. My children were born when we lived in the Bronx. One thing you can say about New York City is that it is very stimulating. Overstimulating. And I noticed how when things got especially loud, my babies would just pass out and blissfully sleep through it all. Their bodies would say, “Nope! I’m not here for this!” And they would check out. What a fabulous defense mechanism! It’s like those fainting goats you can see in videos on the Internet.

As I hear our first reading today, I think about Moses with his face all aglow, and his fellow Israelites begging him to hide his face from them, so that he had to wear a veil for the rest of his life. From what, exactly, was Moses shielding them?

I think the disciples Peter, James, and John in today’s Gospel reading had a similar veil covering their eyes as they witnessed the transfiguration. You can see the veil in the fact that they kept silent. These disciples saw something breath-takingly amazing, and yet they were silent and told no one. Why was that? They were silent because they couldn’t even understand what they had just witnessed. They couldn’t make sense of it, put words behind it, make sense

of it to anyone. Their understanding shut down in the face of something too overwhelming to grasp.

## **II. Thesis**

So what's the bad news of the Gospel? The bad news is that nearly everyone who encounters God in the Bible is terrified. That's what we've heard in the past several weeks with the calling of the different prophets. They were all terrified, they all made excuses, they all resisted God's call. When Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, encountered God in the temple, he left unable to speak for nine months. When Paul encountered God on the road to Damascus, he was blind for three days. The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who long for an encounter with God, something they call "The Day of the Lord," and he tells them, "you don't even know what you're asking for. That's not going to be a good day for you. You're not ready for it. You are going to be terrified."

So we sometimes talk about mountain-top experiences. Direct encounters with the God who loves us. And those are things to be yearned for but I wonder if we often fail to recognize them for what they are. I wonder if we have them more often than we realize, but we fail to recognize them and remain silent just like Peter and James and John. I wonder if our own understandings are veiled, because an encounter with God can be a terrible thing. It's not that God is terrible, but that the light of God's presence reveals things, enacts Epiphany, brings to light truths that we would rather not face. And so we hide behind veils.

Have you ever felt unwell, but not known why? It could have had physical symptoms, and maybe some emotional ones too. They're all tied together. Were you ever afraid to go to your therapist or your doctor to ask about them? You wanted to know, but you weren't sure you wanted to know.

If your doctor puts a label on it, that can be a great relief. "Oh, that's what it is. That's how all those symptoms tie together." The diagnosis seems to resolve all the discomfort, not in the sense of making it go away but in the sense of giving it focus, helping the sufferer to perceive it more clearly, and holding out the promise that it can be dealt with head-on.

But occasionally I encounter people who have a diagnosis that's still too much for them to handle. Cancer is often seen that way. They prefer to live in denial: they don't want to see reality for what it is, because it's just too hard.

The bad news is that the light of the presence of God reveals everything: not just the things we're proud of. It also reveals the things of which we're most ashamed or most disappointed. The things we'd really rather not face. God's light pierces the veils of myth and self-deception, making visible the things we'd rather not know about ourselves.

### **III. Good News**

The good news is that God does not force the light of God's presence upon us. God waits patiently for us to approach God. Sometimes God throws out invitations to us at particularly opportune times, as God did with the prophets and with Zechariah and with Paul. When we're ready for a mountaintop experience, I believe God has no difficulty making that happen for us. But it won't necessarily be an uplifting experience full of joy and honey – at least not at first. It may be something very hard. And it may only be in hindsight that we all of a sudden start and say, “Oh! Look at what happened! Was that God at work in my life?”

### **IV. Invitation**

Lent is the season when Christians traditionally take on special disciplines, special fasts. Are you giving up meat, chocolate, or caffeine for Lent? Something you know you don't need or maybe even something you know is not good for you? Are you giving up eating out and donating the money to a charity that feeds the hungry? Are you giving up television news and spending more time in silence?

Spiritual disciplines are about getting real with ourselves and with God. The spiritual disciplines are practical ways that God gives us so that we can take the initiative. God empowers us to peel back the veil just a little, like a child peeking around the corner, to test out God's presence and expose ourselves just a little bit to God's transfiguring light.

God's light not only reveals: it heals. But the way to healing is often a slog right through the middle of the pain.

The temptation is to shut down like infants. Or fainting goats. But the invitation is to grow, to risk ourselves to God's tender care, and to allow God's light to shine ever more brightly into our lives. One important way we do this is by practicing the ancient spiritual disciplines. Things like fasting, silence, prayer, worship, pilgrimage, giving, and study.

During Epiphany we have witnessed the revelation of the Son of God in power and glory. Lent is an invitation for us to embrace God's Epiphany, God's revealing power, in our own lives. It won't always be pretty, but it will always be good. And the destination is assured. When we pass out, we pass out in God's arms. When we wake up, and encounter reality directly, we will encounter God at the heart of it. And it was always when my babies would wake up, smile, and interact with me, that my heart was at its fullest.

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