

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany Last (14 February 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

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Collect

O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Kings 2:1-12, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9, Psalm 50:1-6

1 Valentine's Day

As someone who came to the Episcopal Church as an adult, I am amused every year to note that St. Valentine did not make it onto our Episcopal calendar! Instead, on 14 February, when it doesn't fall on a Sunday, our prayer book offers us Cyril, Monk, and Methodius, Bishop who were Missionaries to the Slavs 1000 years ago in the 9th century.

But Valentine's Day has captured the popular imagination. Sometimes it can be a little cloying in its commercialism, with red hearts and candies everywhere, evoking a cultural ideal somewhere between puppy love and the first hormonal blazes of passion. In a world that worships youth and independence, it sometimes feels like there's not as much oxygen left for the ways love can mature and blossom into something deeper over the course of a prolonged partnership through the ups and downs of life and health and circumstances. When all of our cultural stories tend to fixate around one or two narrow facets of the complex gem of love and affection, when the juvenile excesses of Romeo and Juliet monopolize our thinking on the topic, we lose sight of something greater and far more precious that can typically only be found with patience and age.

2 Bottling the lightning

This is an aspect of today's Gospel reading that struck me this week. Jesus, Peter, James, and John go up on a mountain. Something amazing happens there. And Peter says, *A-ha! This is the mountaintop experience I've been looking for! This is the encounter with God I've waited for all my life! I've got to hold onto this!* And so Peter wants to build a building to contain their experience, to institutionalize it, to bring it under control, to memorialize it, and to make it last forever. Peter wants to bottle the lightning. Jesus has barely begun his ministry, and Peter thinks they've reached the climax. Peter has mistaken the appetizer for the main course, a brief Epiphany for the coming of the Kingdom of God in all its power. Peter has dramatically mis-read the situation and he's probably not going to take "No" for an answer until God surrounds him with a cloud and says, "Nope! Not yet! Don't get stuck here!"

3 Looking for More

In our first reading, Elisha already knows this. Elisha is, as Jesus would later advise his followers to do, staying awake and alert for the breaking-in of God's activity in a new, noticeable way. Elisha knows that what he's experienced so far in his teacher Elijah is just a glimpse of God's powerful presence. Elisha wants more.

So here's the question that's prompted in me by today's readings: am I going to settle for what I see around me, call it good enough, and just try not to rock the boat? Or am I going to follow Elisha and keep looking for something more? What is the calling of Jesus in this? What is the promise of God?

As Christians, we do **not** affirm that the world is mostly OK and that we should be satisfied with how things are. We're not here to steady the boat and keep things the way they are. Instead, as Christians we all the time talk about heaven, about the Kingdom of God, about being transformed into God's image. The witness of the Bible, the whole *point* of the Bible, is that things are wrong in the world and in human relationships – and God is about the business of repairing those wrongs. To be a Bible-believing Christian is to be a witness both to the wrongs and to God's promise to right them. To be a Christian is to participate in that righting of wrongs, not just accepting incremental decreases in isolated pockets of the evil in our world. We participate by acknowledging our shortcomings, our complicity, our own unique contributions to the evil in the world. We participate by confessing, repenting, and receiving forgiveness: God's promise that changes us and through us changes the world.

So we don't just settle for addiction. Instead we look for the freedom God promises.

We don't settle for broken relationships. Instead we look for connection and reconciliation.

We don't settle for a warm home and a nice car. Instead we look to live lives of purpose and meaning and joy.

Or let's take this a little deeper. St. Thomas' is celebrating Black History Month. What are the lessons we might take from the history of the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States as we think about today's Gospel?

Maybe we don't just settle for outlawing Jim Crow and racial discrimination. Instead we continue to look for that Beloved Community described by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Maybe we don't settle for not saying things that are blatantly racist. Instead we look for the very image of God in every human being.

Maybe we don't settle for a world with unequal health outcomes as Covid races through non-white communities. Maybe we don't settle for continuing wealth disparities and shorter life-expectancies and inferior educational opportunities and continuing employment discrimination and a widespread fear and suspicion of the police forces that are supposed to serve and protect. Maybe we don't accept lead in the water or toxins in the air for anyone. We do not accept, we do not settle for our current realities, for the current state of things. Because as Christians we believe that the current state of things is broken, unacceptable, and in desperate need of the powerful intervention of God's Holy Spirit to upset the status quo and bring about nearer experience of God's Kingdom in the here and now.

4 Jesus' Example

Every good thing we experience, every taste of God's presence, every fulfillment of justice, every gift of grace: these are only foretastes and promises. They're appetizers. Don't fill up on the bread sticks: something even better, much better, is on its way. As Christians, we reject the status quo, we recognize it for what it is: a compromise with Satan. Because God's will is not yet fulfilled in us or in our world.

Today is the last Sunday of Epiphany. In the Epiphany, we recognize that God, in Jesus, manifested God's light even to us, the Gentiles. Like the citizens of Nineveh, we didn't know up from down and wrong from right and that is precisely when God came to us. But the work of God begun in Jesus Christ is not yet fully seen. The light shone for a little while in Jesus, and it has been kept alive in Christ's church, shining through you and me. It shines out and it gives us hope. It shines out and gives us power. Someday that light will engulf the entire world, inescapable and unstoppable. And all the best things that we experience today will pale by comparison.

Friends, don't settle for the sort-of good things you have now. Don't settle for a small measure of justice. Don't settle for *less inequality* instead of equality. Give thanks for these incremental improvements, but don't get distracted by them from the even greater promises of God. Life today is in many ways better than it was 50 years ago, 100 years ago, 1000 years ago. But still we look for God's Kingdom when the perfect will come, and all that is imperfect will pass away. In the meantime, we are called into the great joy of discovering the contours of that Kingdom, the ways it shows up in our lives and in our communities, and helping to make those contours known to the people around us, so that everyone may get a glimpse of God's Kingdom and God's gracious invitation to all. God's promise is greater than our imaginations: don't settle for anything less.

Amen.