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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 23, 2020
Matthew 17:1-9

Our Gospel lesson today begins in a curious way today. The first words of the seventeenth chapter of Matthew are: "Six days later..." What an unusual way to begin a story about Jesus. As far as I am able to tell, this is the only precise marking of chronology in Matthew's gospel prior to the passion story. "Six days later..." We have to wonder: what happened six days earlier that would be so important as to reference it at the start of this chapter? This suggests that something remarkable had happened before – perhaps something that may have required some time to take in and accept.

If we looked in our bibles, we would see that the passage immediately preceding today's lesson is of Peter's bold confession of Jesus as Messiah followed immediately by Jesus giving the disciples the shocking news that he is a quite *different* Messiah than they were expecting – one that will be rejected by the religious authorities and put to death, and then after three days, will rise again. More than that, Jesus goes on to tell the disciples that they, too, must take up their crosses and follow him, saying, "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (16:24-25)

Well, I suppose that would be a bit difficult to take in. I imagine that it would be shocking to be told that the Messiah that had been foretold in holy scripture and that the disciples had been eagerly awaiting, thought they had found, and had been following devotedly, that *this* Messiah would look little like King David, and more like the suffering servant prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. It must have been difficult to accept that this Messiah would not be the strong political and military leader they had waited their whole lives for and who would save them from Roman oppression, but instead is a Messiah who will be rejected, scorned and killed, and who exhorts them to deny themselves, lose their lives for his sake, and to take up their crosses and follow him. This is a lot to process and take in. This also sets the stage for our reading today.

Six days later.... It is only after six days have passed since this shocking revelation of who Jesus is and just how different he will be than expected, that Matthew continues his gospel narrative with Jesus taking Peter, James and John up a high mountain. I image that these three, along with the other disciples, had struggled mightily with this news over the past six days. Matthew doesn't tell us what Jesus and his group do during this time. More healings? More deeds of power and miraculous feedings? More teachings? Maybe, but I imagine something much more pedestrian and human. I imagine that Jesus spent a good deal of the time explaining to his disciples just what this future means. There must have been days of discussion and nights of restless sleep while these poor disciples try to sort this out and make sense of what Jesus has revealed. How do they see the Anointed One of God in a person that will be rejected, scorned and put to death? How do they see God in someone who so radically does *not* meet their expectations?

It seems to me that Jesus understood the struggles of his disciples and the questions they had. I think Jesus understood that they were unable reconcile their expectations with how Jesus knew the story of his earthly life was going to end – that they were unable to see Christ in a Jesus whose life would end in such disgrace. So, Jesus pulls his inner circle of disciples aside and takes Peter, James and John to the top of a mountain. It is there, in this thin place between the heavens and the earth, that Jesus reveals himself in his full glory. He is transfigured before these three disciples: glowing and shining with divine majesty, and is seen talking with Elijah and Moses. The disciples are awestruck and terrified at this display, unsure of how to respond. Then it happens....a cloud covered the sky and cast everything in its shadow. And from this cloud came the fearsome voice of God naming Jesus as his Son, the Beloved, and commanding the disciples to "Listen to him!"

On this Last Sunday after Epiphany, Matthew's account of the transfiguration of Jesus provides yet another epiphany of Jesus' true nature and demonstrates divine affirmation of Jesus'

way of the cross. The heavenly voice commands that we *all* listen to Jesus and that what Jesus teaches us is one with God's will. Through the vision of Jesus' divine glory and the heavenly voice identifying Jesus as God's proclaimed Son and Beloved, the disciples are given a definitive answer to their questions about who Jesus is and his Messiahship.

Sometimes, we, like Peter, James and John, are given glimpses of the true nature of things. Sometimes, we are granted clarity of vision to see people for who they really are...and to whom they really belong. Sometimes, we, too, have mountaintop epiphany experiences. But more often, we, like the disciples, have a hard time seeing Christ in the midst of pain, rejection, suffering and death. Like Peter, James and John, we, too, struggle to see clearly and to understand that the deep reality isn't always the way it seems or the way we are culturally conditioned to see.

In our baptismal covenant, we promise that with God's help, we will "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself." This, I think, is most demanding of the baptismal promises. It is immensely challenging to see beyond the surface and to set aside our expectations of people in order to allow them to surprise us and show us who they really are. It is hard for us to see Christ in someone who doesn't measure up to our definition of what that should be. How do we do that when it can be so difficult to see Christ in the person cutting you off on the Beltway, or the person who said mean things about you behind your back, or the person who looks crazy and smells bad and who asks you for money? And in these current times we may wonder how to see Christ in the person who posts political commentary on Facebook that you find offensive?

I think this Gospel lesson today gives us some insight, even though few of us will have epiphanies like we read this morning – few of us will have mountain-top experiences this obvious and powerful. But if we think about it, most of us have had little epiphanies in our lives – mini mountaintop experiences – which help to remind us that reality is more than it seems. These moments of grace help remind us that there is much more *Truth* than what we see on the surface. These moments of divine clarity can be beautiful as well as shocking or disturbing.

I told this story two years ago at this time, but it is so good, I just have to tell it again. I will always remember one late and sleepless night at home with my newborn daughter when something surprising and awe-some happened. It must have been around three or four in the morning and I was holding two-week old Emma while sitting in the darkened living room, lit only faintly by a low light from the kitchen. I was gazing at her, slightly mesmerized by her beauty and perfection and beginning to sense the enormity and fierceness of my love for this tiny person, when I swear she started to glow.

She was looking into my eyes and there, in my arms, a warm light surrounded my little Emma and she radiated an otherworldly and yet certain peace and knowing. There, before me, she was *transfigured* – she was lit with God's glory and something extraordinary was revealed about her nature. It felt like time stood still and I was standing in the thin boundary between the heavens and the earth. This must have lasted only a moment before it faded and she returned to her normal baby self, but that was long enough to leave me forever changed by the experience. It was then that I understood what it meant to be made in the image of God. That night, for only a moment, she bore this image and shone warmly with God's glory.

From this little epiphany, this mini-mountaintop experience, I realized that if the Christ light was in my daughter, it was also in all of us. If I could see it there, I could seek and serve it in all persons – with God's help. You may not have had a little epiphany in the same way as I have, but I'll be willing to bet you have had some experience when you suddenly saw the Truth under the surface, saw another person with the Eyes of God, or saw the Christ light in your neighbor. Experiences like these help to remind us to look deeply, more deeply than we would otherwise, to see Christ in the face of all people. These experiences give us the patience and openness that is necessary, the time and space needed, to allow our awareness to be sensitive to the glimpses of Christ in the people around us. Seeing Christ in Jesus and witnessing God's favor of him gave Peter, James, and John the courage to move beyond their fears and expectations, and continue to follow

this Suffering Messiah into unknown territories. In the same way, developing the discernment to see Christ in all people will help us to move beyond our fears of the unknown and unexpected so that we may live out our faith more fully and take up our cross to follow Jesus.

Amen.