

Our lives are a jumble of hope and pain, reality and mystery, joy and fear. Each of those things is reflected in the rhythm of the church year. In the stories we hear in church each Sunday, the liturgical seasons move us toward wholeness. Just as there are rhythms in our lives, days, months, years, there are rhythms to the church year. Time marches ahead, but it does not march in a straight line. It circles back to familiar celebrations and emotions and stories.

The cycle of the church year gathers up reality, mystery, teaching, preaching, prophecy, warning, joy, sorrow. Excitement, anticipation and fulfillment. This mixture is reflected in our scriptures which contain the stories and lessons from ages past which are relevant to today.

Today we get a glimpse of glory in the story Christ's Transfiguration. But it's tinged with sadness because Peter knows he can't hold on to it. He can only hold on to the memory of it, which he knows will fade. He holds on only to the hope that he will see it again.

The reality is, that Jesus is on his way to a violent death on a hill called Golgotha, but he embodies the fullness of the glory of God on the hill in today's gospel. And our reality is, that every once in a while, in the midst of tragedy and sorrow, if we are in the right place, at the right time, and IF we are paying attention, we will catch a glimpse of that glory.

How do we make sense of the contrasts of realities and the mixture of emotions in our lives? Jesus did it by removing himself to a different place to pray. And offering himself up to God. Sometimes we have to remove ourselves to a different place, and place ourselves in God's hands, in prayer, before we can see our way ahead. Other times we are called upon to remain right the middle of painful truths and be the reflection of God's amazing light in hopeless situations. While we live in this world, we know from our life experience that our glimpses of God's goodness will always be bracketed by pain.

Seasons of the church year come around each year and always move us toward something: Advent moves us at the same time toward the birth of an expected Messiah, and toward the fulfillment of God's purpose at the end of time. And then on Christmas Eve, we stop, and just behold what God has done. In order to grasp the meaning of the birth of a baby in whom all the glory of God dwells, we peer into the stable. And thank God for the glorious moment.

The season of Lent moves us gently in preparation for a moment where the risen Lord is encountered in the garden, having been raised from the dead. The season of Easter moves us to receive the Holy Spirit along with the apostles at Pentecost.

The season of Epiphany which ends today, has moved us Sunday by Sunday toward a greater understanding of Jesus identity. While Jesus has been walking toward Jerusalem, he makes a stop with Peter, James and John on a mountaintop. There, surrounded by a cloud of mystery, they see him like they've never seen him before. Not that he's changed, but their eyes have been opened to who he really is.

On that holy mountain, images of transfiguration and baptism, resurrection and ascension merge into the ultimate Epiphany. Moses evokes Images of receiving the law, Elijah represents the call of the prophets. There are clouds which terrify, voices from heaven, blinding glory, shining faces...those images which have always been associated with God, on a mountain, they are now associated with Jesus on that holy hill. Those images are transferred to Jesus, who is indeed God with us.

Who was transfigured? was Jesus? or were the disciples who caught a glimpse of God's glory, when the veil between God and man slipped away, and the realities of glory and suffering intersected? Or was the entire human experience transfigured by this holy mystery?

*The holy mystery entering into human experience.* That's what Moses witnessed on Mount Sinai as he spoke with God. He positively glowed after he encountered that Holy One, such that the scriptures tell us people were frightened at the sight of his face. I'll bet Peter's face was glowing too when he blurted out that he never wanted to leave the place, that he wanted to build a house for them so he could always be at that rare and radiant place where God's presence was absolutely undeniable, where everything was clear, and goodness and light enveloped him with no effort on his part at all.

Where God was God and all was right on that mountaintop. No pain. No ambiguity. No doubt. That IS a great place to be! As soon as he expressed that thought out loud, he and his friends were overtaken by a cloud that terrified them. They were told to listen to Jesus, pay attention to Jesus – God's chosen. Not to institutionalize or analyze that wonderful feeling. Just behold and listen.

Peter had wanted to capture this experience of God so that he could always access it without effort. He was quickly reminded that God will not be contained by any one image of God, or any one experience of God. The cloud lifted, and there, in the place of the vision, in place of the brightness was Jesus. Alone. And on a mission to heal and reconcile. To gather all into God's healing embrace. In that holy purpose is where God can always be found.

So, Peter reluctantly packed up his newly stretched capacity for God, Jesus led them down the mountain, and there, using new eyes of faith, they saw another manifestation of God in Jesus as he continued his earthly ministry.

Our journey of Epiphany is now complete. The glory and identity of Jesus Christ has been reinforced, not in the mountaintop experience but the next day in the midst of a great crowd when Jesus returns to his ministry of healing and all are astounded at the greatness of God. SO THIS is who God is – we will say --- holy and healing.

There are many times when we'll have good reason to be afraid and confused. Jesus understands that and reminds us, time after time, to choose to NOT be afraid. We are asked to believe that God's glory can break through at any moment, through our memories, through our shared stories.

Perhaps there have been moments in your life when all is crystal clear, and time and space stand still and God is made known in all God's glory. If so, you are truly blessed.

Most of the time, however, we live in the space between the extremes of the glorious and the terrifying. I believe a good and loving God is with us every place in between. I believe we need each other to rejoice in the fabulous moments and weep together in those moments that threaten to leave us without hope.

As we approach our Lenten journey together: may the Holy Spirit stretch our capacity to hear and see and respond to God in all God's glory, no matter where we are, or what we're doing.