

“The Vision of God”

Mark 9: 2-9

Epiphany Last B (Transfiguration), Boise, 2021

We are more familiar with God’s voice than with His appearance. The Divine Word enters the Biblical story on the first day of Creation: “Let there be light.” It addressed itself to every major character thereafter — to Noah, then Abraham and the patriarchs, to Moses and each of the prophets, and to the entire assembly of Israel from the top of Mount Sinai. In the era of the New Covenant, we are all told to listen for it and receive its direction. Yet on some occasions, God not only speaks; He also appears. In Christ Jesus, He did both. The Word became flesh, and took the permanent form of a man. — That’s what the season of Epiphany is about, God’s manifesting Himself to us in Jesus of Nazareth, David’s Anointed Heir. In Christ, God was appearing continuously, but also more obviously on particular occasions — at Bethlehem when the Magi, following a star, came to visit; at the river Jordan when the Heavenly Dove descended; and whenever He manifested God’s power in a miracle. Yet in Epiphanytide, we save the most dramatic of those appearances for the last Sunday of the season, today. “His clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one on earth could bleach them.” Jesus acknowledged to His disciples that He was the Messiah just a week before. And now on Mount Hermon, to the north of Galilee, the Divine glory that the Son shares eternally with the Father and the Spirit shines brightly in the humanity that He assumed in the womb of His human mother. No more secrets about who Jesus of Nazareth is — at least not for the inner circle, Peter, James, and John.

There is a history behind this, the Divine Word’s revealing the glory He has with the other Two Divine Persons in the flesh of Jesus. The Hebrew word for

glory, *kavod*, has a precise meaning in the OT; one could even say a technical one. It appeared as a “pillar of light” to lead the Israelites out of Egypt at night, and then took the form of a cloud during the day to shield them from the desert sun. At Sinai the *kavod*, or glory, struck the people with full force, or as much of it as they could stand — with thunder and lightening and a sound that resembled the blast of a trumpet. Then “the LORD descended on [the mountain] in fire,” it smoked [Ex 19: 18], and He spoke the Ten Words. When the Israelites moved on, the *kavod* returned to its previous form, leading and shielding them until they constructed the Tabernacle, or holy Tent. God then entered the Holy of Holies with His *kavod*, making Himself present locally, right over the Ark of the Covenant between two gilded cherubim, whenever they set up camp. Only the High Priest was allowed to visit the *kavod* in a ritual cleansing of the sanctuary on the annual Day of Atonement. The glory otherwise was to stay hidden.

Hundreds of years later, in the reign of Solomon, the *kavod* entered the stone Temple that he built. And there it remained until it departed in the days ahead of Jerusalem’s destruction by Nebuchadnezzar’s troops. The Psalm we chanted expresses the desire, in the midst of a contest with the wicked, to seek the Lord in His Temple and behold His “fair beauty” [Ps 27: 5]. But the closest even a king could get to it was the beautiful ceremonies that accompanied the sacrifices in the Temple’s courtyard.

Our OT reading today takes us back to Mount Sinai. Elijah has fled Jezebel and left Israel to return to the wilderness, thinking that he is the only man left who is loyal to Yahweh. He climbs the mountain to the place where the *kavod* appeared when the Law was given, and finds a cave to lodge in. God tells Elijah to stand outside and wait for Him. First, there is a strong wind, then an earthquake, and then a fire. But God does not repeat His performance in the

Exodus, appearing with such dramatic effects. He makes no visible appearance at all this time, but speaks to the prophet standing at the entrance to the cave “in a still small voice” [1 Ki 19: 12, KJV], just a “whisper” [ESV]. “No, Elijah, you are not the only righteous man left. Seven thousand others in Israel have not bowed the knee to Baal.” Then God gives the prophet his instructions for his next set of tasks. — What do we learn from that? That God chooses His own manner of appearing and speaking. He doesn’t do theophanies on request. Sure, we can ask for His presence. But what follows our asking can be answered with a “no,” or a complete surprise.

The Incarnation was a surprise — not really anticipated in the OT prophecies. God promised Israel the Messiah, David’s Heir. But that He would send His own Son to do the Messiah’s job? That was pure surprise, even though it made sense, given the job’s magnitude. The surprise remained a secret throughout most of Jesus’ time on earth. God truly did become man, and lived as man — to the extent that most thought Him to be merely an extraordinary man. The Fourth Gospel treats each of the miracles it describes as revelations of the Divine glory that the Son shares with the Father and bore with Him from Heaven. But it is in St Mark and the two other Synoptic Gospels that we get the unmistakable appearance of the *kavod* to Peter, James and John, when the flesh of Jesus is filled with light, Moses and Elijah attending. They are not on Sinai, but on Mount Hermon, in Gentile territory. It is the tallest peak in the region, and its melting snows in the spring are the main source of the Jordan flowing from it. Peter wants to do what believers before him did wherever the Heavenly Persons appeared. He wants to build shrines to memorialize the event, and give future generations a new place of pilgrimage. But a voice from Heaven instructs the three disciples merely to listen: “This is My beloved Son; hear Him.”

God appeared on a mountain. That feature of the epiphany was not a surprise. It was the timing of it that signified something new. Jesus would soon conclude His Galilean ministry and then head south with His disciples, setting His face toward Jerusalem, where He would make His Sacrifice. A trial lay ahead not just for Jesus but for the disciples too. So contrary to their expectations was the idea that the Messiah would be killed, that it took Jesus three times to get the message across — and they still would not believe it. But now at this crucial moment, before they head into the fray that would result in their Master's death, three of them are given this vision, a vision of the glory that more would see after Jesus' Resurrection. Peter, James, and John needed that vision before the crisis to sustain them — and one that, later in their trials as Apostles, they could look back on, as we see Peter doing in today's Epistle.

Because their vision of Christ on Mount Hermon was recorded, it is now available to us. As the wise man says in Proverbs, "Where there is no vision, the people perish" [Prov 29: 18]. We are God's people today; so let the vision of Christ's Transfiguration sustain us in the weeks ahead, as we make our way through the Lenten wilderness, ending in Holy Week, when we travel with Our Lord down the *via dolorosa* to the Cross.

We begin the season this Wednesday with ashes, and move the following Sunday to the Devil's Temptations of Christ in the desert. What Satan offers is illusions, illusions of power, wealth, and grandeur, and our best defense against them is the vision of God, available to us in God's Incarnate Word. So let us linger before the scene of the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon, that we might remember it. Let us take in all the scenes we have described for us in the Gospels, to encourage and inspire us to finish our journey and get past the trials we face, as we move with Christ through the wilderness on this New Exodus that He leads. The sights we are given will sustain us until we reach that final vision of God, about which St Paul wrote, the vision that has no end — that

face-to-face encounter in which we shall know fully, even as we are known [1
Cor 13: 12].

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