

*2 Kings 2: 1 - 12*

*Psalm 50: 1 - 6*

Year B, Last Sunday of Epiphany

*2 Corinthians 4: 3 - 6*

*Mark 9: 2 - 9*

February 22, 2009

*Thin Places*

The ancient Celtic Church had a name for it: a thin place. Their idea is amazingly simple and magnificently hope-filled. For these communities, there was an absolute belief in this world and a complete faith in the next world. We could learn a lot for them. From the rising of the sun to its setting, they prayed and talked about the two worlds almost interchangeably. They would wake and thank God for being alive. Many of their prayers have been lost, but they have prayers for almost everything. They had a dish washing prayer. They had a hunting prayer. They had an eating and relaxing prayer. If there was a transition from one event to another, they would pray. With this practice of soaking everything deeply in prayer, they became attuned to places both in time and location where you could feel and almost see from this world into the next. Typically they were referring to the idea of a place being a little closer to heaven, a little nearer to the warm, beating heart of God. They call them, “thin places.” In those holy spots, this world and the next were a whole lot closer than everyday life. So you made pilgrimages, travelled, and worked to reach a thin place, where you could sense God a little more and have a better chat.

The Transfiguration is a biblical thin place. Jesus walks up the mountain like everyone else and suddenly is sitting with Moses and Elijah, shining whiter and brighter than any bottle of Downy or Clorox could ever make clothes. Now, on a completely side note: how exactly were Peter, John and James able to recognize these two pillars of Judaism? Was there an awkward introduction moment with Jesus? - “Moses and Elijah, these are my disciples John, James and Peter. Peter please close your mouth now.” Or is Moses just

doomed to carry around two stone tablets for easy identification in this life and the next? Regardless, you have a moment where the true identity and glory of Jesus is revealed. A voice from the clouds announces helpfully, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” The membrane between this world and the next is temporarily pulled back so that we can see more of God, experience more of God, feel more of God. The only problem is that most Christians have no idea what to do with this story. We can accept on an intellectual level maybe that Jesus is divine and other but how does it affect us? How does this story relate to our lives?

I have long wondered what we are to do with the Transfiguration. Scholars like to tweak Peter’s request to build houses/booths for the three leaders. Otherwise, there is a bit of confusion from even those learned brains about what it means to us as Christians. Jesus is shiny. We are not. I have struggled and wrestled with the story on so many levels. What does it mean? What are we to make of it? Why is this story the last before we enter the great 40 days of Lent? Shouldn’t we have an appropriately miserable moment to lead into this time of self-denial?

I began thinking about this story very differently thanks to The Rt. Rev. Furman Stough. The past Bishop of Alabama was assisting Bishop Jim Coleman in our diocese at the time. Bishop Coleman could not attend a closing for Happening so Bishop Stough agreed to help with the service. For those who do not know, Happening is a Christian renewal weekend for teenagers led by teenagers. The whole purpose and function of the event is to allow these gifted young people to ministry and serve one another in an expression of God’s deep and eternal love for us. The weekend is powerful beyond words and certainly qualifies as a high moment for almost all who attend. Bishop Stough’s sermon was as short and sweet as I have ever heard.

After hearing this very reading of the Transfiguration, he got up and turn to the youth and said, “This is the real world, the love and hope and joy you are experiencing is the real world of God’s kingdom. Everything else out there is fake.” For the Bishop and all of those youth, Happening was and is a thin place where God’s kingdom can and does break through into their lives, shining more brightly than any bottle of Clorox bleach. The real world is God’s kingdom not all the rest.

From there, Lent and this reading make sense. The purpose of this coming season is not to make us miserable and lowly. The entire theological idea is for us to realize what is most important. We can be distracted by so very much in this world. We are constantly sold that seeing the latest movie or tv show matters, that owning Apple’s newest product is important, that having the newest and brightest and best is what is the most important. Good ole St. Paul even makes mention of such an obsession in his Epistle this morning. We are blinded to God’s kingdom by the passing fancies of this world. We find it difficult to see God through the haze of life. Lent in this deepest and most importance sense is seeking to peel away those extra layers, working to find God, and striving to engage the divine. Reading about the Transfiguration is meant to give us a road map of what we are looking for! We are seeking a thin place, as real as Happening, as real as the Celts, as real as this world. We enter Lent with this bright light shining to show us the way through to Easter. We are called to shed all that gets in the way, work to find that holy space, and spend as much time in the presence of God as possible.

In many ways, this community is that thin place, one of many. A place where I pray that you might be able to sense, feel, touch, taste and see God’s presence. A place where I hope you can engage and continue that journey to finding and being found by Jesus. A place where I believe God and man and

woman and friends at table are sat down. This place is what is real. Our faith is what matters. As we enter this season of Lent, I share a prayer as old as the Celts themselves. I pray that we all might find a thin place in this long season of Lent. I pray that you might discover that this world and the next are not as different and distant as they sometime appear to be. I pray that you all might discover a thin place where God again becomes all that matters, all that is real.

Amen.