

**THE LAST
SUNDAY AFTER
THE EPIPHANY**

**The Rev.
Stephanie
E. Parker**

Mark 9:2-9 Last Sunday after the Epiphany 2012

Children of the Light

“Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees, takes off his shoes—the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”

This comes from one of my favorite poems by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning. For years it appeared as my screensaver and as my electronic signature line when I sent emails.

For me these lines served a dual purpose. They were at once a declaration of the ecstatic joy I felt about God’s presence in the world and they were also a reminder of how easy it is to lose sight of God altogether in the day to day routines or hassles of life. They helped me to combat those little daily deaths that often pile on and feel never-ending.

It is very difficult to maintain an awareness of the Divine in the midst of the everyday. Sometimes it can feel like the demands of daily life conspire to keep us from perceiving God’s beauty, order, oneness and mystery.

And I think this is dangerous because when we lose sight of the Divine presence in all things, we lose the ability to be a people of grace, love and thanksgiving.

If we are not careful we can very easily miss the presence and the call of the holy. This is captured in a famous saying of Rabbi Nachman, an 18th century Chasidic master who spent the last part of his life in Breslav, a small town in the Ukraine.

He said: “As the hand before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so our little earthly life hides...it hides the enormous lights and mysteries of which the world is full.”

We *can* block out the sight of a mountain by holding our small hand up to our eyes. In the same way, the small tasks and preoccupations that fill our days can block out a sense that there is more to life than what we currently experience, that we are part of something greater, that something significant is asked of us in this life.

Today as we worship we encounter the Transfiguration of Jesus. We join the shocked disciples up on that mountaintop as we catch a glimpse of Jesus as he truly is--- a human being utterly afire with the divine love and light of God.

This morning finds us leaping many chapters ahead in Mark and we meet Jesus and his disciples in that tender gap when Jesus is trying to get his disciples to understand that far from being the triumphal Messiah they think him to be, he is in fact cut more in the mold of the suffering Servant.

He knows the cross is just ahead of him and this vision of his true glory on that mountain top represents the fusion of the fragile human condition with the Divine truth that the brilliant, transcendent God of the mountaintop experience, is in fact present with us in our ordinary, stumbling and suffering everyday lives.

As Jesus is suffused with dazzling light we hear very similar words to those we heard at Jesus’ baptism, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased!” But the words heard at Jesus’ baptism might seem a distant memory after the difficult confrontations, teachings and misunderstandings that followed shortly after.

Those who are following Jesus are having an increasingly difficult time understanding who and what Jesus really is. And they are having an even harder time understanding what is truly required of them as those who would follow in his footsteps.

So *today* we hear, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” But I believe that both of these divine pronouncements hold a singular truth. They hold the truth to not only Jesus’ true identity and call, but to *our* own true identities as children of God.

These words call us out of the notion that giving our lives to God means the end of all the pain, heartache, and challenge that life can hold. Living fully in the love and light of God has never meant that we are spared the small humiliations of failure or the enormous heartaches of betrayal, loss and failed dreams.

I think that there is a far deeper invitation here. Here as we stand poised on the threshold of Lent I believe the invitation we receive in the Transfiguration of Jesus is the invitation to live fully in the presence of God in all things and throughout every day.

Or, to put it another way, it's about living in such a way that we make God more present, both to ourselves and to others in the midst of all of both life's joy and pain.

This invitation is about living into to deeper reality that if we constantly claim God's presence in the midst of it all, then every word and every action, no matter how ordinary, can be performed in a way that makes God more present in this world.

The disciples experience on that mountain top teaches us that our fear that there is a gap between us and God is an illusion; in truth, God is present in every place, in every person, at every moment – it's only our perception that is clouded. Whatever we do to increase awareness of this reality is a faithful act of solidarity with the divine.

We *have* the power to make God manifest in this world. We wield this power by opening our own eyes to order, beauty, mystery and the essential oneness of all things; and by bringing God's justice, love, and compassionate care with us wherever we go.

In the late 1950's Paul Tillich preached a sermon he titled *In Everything Give Thanks*⁴ (1 Th 5:18). He preached it to young people in university congregations.

He began by contrasting the superficiality of thanksgiving in most cultures with its deeper religious significance. He said that not only are we mortals driven to give thanks, but we also have a profound need to receive thanks.

Tillich explored what he called "the state of silent gratefulness."

This is the idea that God is creatively present in everyone in every moment whether we are aware of it or not. But when we are in this state of silent gratefulness, we are aware of God's presence and we experience an elevation of life.

Thanksgiving is also a deep part of our identity as those who love and follow Christ. Gratitude and a foundational joy in even difficult and challenging times is so vitally important to a life of faith in that it consecrates everything created by God.

This "state of silent gratefulness" opens our hearts and minds to see every bush afire with God. A deeper understanding of God presence in all things and absorbing all things can elevate those things that seem hopeless into the sphere of the holy. Claiming our identity as children of God and listening closely to what Jesus teaches us transforms us into bearers of God's grace.

This morning [at the 10:30 service] we are baptizing little Benjamin Christian Pollock. And during that sacred and wonderful ritual we will pray:

Sustain Ben, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give him an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.

The life to which we lay claim in all our baptisms is a life where day by day we wed the electric beauty of God's light to the challenges of our everyday ordinary lives.

Each day offers us the chance to choose to love, and not hate, to be friends and not enemies, to forgive and not to hold grudges, to heal and help and hold and not to injure, wound and scar.

These daily choices might seem to come at a high price to those who cannot understand the freedom to which the love of God calls us. But the reward of such a life is far greater than its cost.

So in the end we learn that we are not asked to build altars on the high places, but to see in truth that the Divine light of God infuses the entire world. We are invited to let the scales fall from our eyes and see that every bush is indeed afire with God and that the only thing that really hides the Divine from our sight is the metaphorical hand we hold up to block our field of vision to this magnificent reality.

Earth *is* crammed with heaven and as beloved children of God our inheritance is the power to see everything suffused with God's dazzling and holy light. There is nothing so broken in this world or so painful in this life that this light and love cannot penetrate, heal and make whole.

This is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.....*listen to him.*

Amen

The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org