

Last Sunday after Epiphany  
February 22, 2009 - Year B  
St. David's

It's like we have a twin, huh? It looked exactly like worship at St. David's, didn't it?

It is not often that any of us would have difficulty determining whether something we read was the script for a Hollywood movie or an excerpt from our sacred text. But here, on the Last Sunday of Epiphany, you can hardly tell them apart. Did, for example, the flaming chariot flying off to the heavens occur in the Second book of Kings or the movie Chariots of Fire? Is that movement of consuming flame and a raging storm a Steven Spielberg visual effect or is it a description of God from Psalm 50? And is the bright white vision of a man dressed in black from the Gospel of Mark or a cult classic movie? If you think you know the answers, write them on the back of a World Series ticket and mail them to your Rector to collect your prize. Today, we are treated to a series of lights, camera, and action stories, heavy on the lights.

I suppose that for some, this may be a bit troubling. Over the last few weeks, our Epiphany stories have presented our post-Enlightenment minds the challenge of understanding Jesus as a healer beyond rational explanation. At the beginning of the season, we had to deal with a star and astrology as methodologies to experience an Epiphany. But all of that was a piece of cake compared to today. Today's Epiphanies are just sooo Hollywood. What are we to make of these visual effects that seem to be LSD induced? What can it mean that the last week of Epiphany looks like a scene from the Blues Brothers?

O, we so much want it to be true, don't we? Who wouldn't want to experience God in a blinding light that could not possibly be mistaken for anything else? Who wouldn't want to eliminate any possible ambiguity when it comes to a revelation of God? Who wouldn't want to be as clear as Jake Blues when it comes to understanding what God wants us to do with our lives? Imagine how much easier our lives would be if each of us had a personal encounter with God on the level of Peter, James and John. All of us, of course, want to experience an Epiphany. We imagine that after such an experience, it would be difficult to ever question our faith again, making our lives so much better and so connected to God.

Those other Epiphany stories that led up to today were nice enough, but if we are truthful with ourselves, we would much prefer the blinded by the light version of today, wouldn't we? We want an experience of God so tangible and so profound that it knocks our socks off, don't we? All of us want to be on the mountaintop with Peter, James and John. All of us want to be sitting in church and have a sunbeam come through our roof here and light up just us. We want God to be so brilliantly dazzling, that it changes our lives. These little guys here are fine, but all of us would rather have this Epiphany, wouldn't we? So maybe the writers of today's lessons are on to something after all. The discreet experiences of God in the last few weeks were just fine, but we all know that the big one would change everything for us. Enough of the still small voice of God stuff. We want a transfiguration. We want to turn handstands up the center aisle of St. David's. We want fireworks and whirlwinds. We want chariots of fire and dazzling lights. We want to be blinded by a light, so bright, that we

could not possibly miss it.

There is additional biblical evidence that such an event is not just over exuberant metaphor. This happens to more than a few people in our text. One of the most obvious ones is the story of the conversion experience of one Saul of Tarsus, who will become Paul. In Acts 22, his encounter also includes a brilliantly blinding light, a light so bright that knocks it him off his high horse, so to speak and literally blinds him. We also hearken back to Exodus and the God who appears to Moses as a stunningly bright burning bush.

All of these pyrotechnic lessons have contributed to the notion that not only are such blinding light experiences of God possible for you and me, but they represent the ultimate faith experience. After all, it is not just people in Biblical times that have described such events. We know the stories of folk like John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila who had regular ecstatic experiences of God. We hold them up as models. And while the movie clip offers a slightly tongue in cheek view of a contemporary experience of God's blinding light, I bet most of us either know someone who has described to us such an experience, or we have had one ourselves. And just like our pal Jake Blues, many continue to describe that experience as "seeing the light." I was taught as a child that if I prayed hard enough, I too would have such an experience. As a seminarian, the suggestion was made that if we did worship well, it would create a situation where more people would have Transfiguration experiences and be blinded by the light of God.

The question for me to today is not whether such experiences can really happen

or whether they are valid. I have no doubt that the disciples had a stunning post-Easter experience of Christ during Jesus's life. I also have no doubt that some of us have had real transfiguration experiences. My question is this. "Is a blinding light encounter really the ultimate faith experience? Is this what all of us should be striving for in our own lives? And is it true that by having a blinding light experience, our faith lives would be so much simpler and we would never doubt in God again?"

While this may sound like a duh question at first, I believe there is reason to believe that such a transfiguration experience in our own lives may not be all it is cracked up to be and that it may be a mistake to suggest that people who have them are somehow special. For one, such a theology buys into the notion that God chooses some of us over others. Chosen people theology rightly died early in the Hebrew Bible, but by suggesting that people who have dramatic revelatory experiences are separated from the rest of us, we are buying right back into those archaic beliefs. It creates another case of haves and have nots among us. It creates exclusion and it runs directly in the face of the teachings of Jesus who broke down all those barriers that were separating us. It seems to me that some of us have blinding light experiences and some us do not. People who have never had such an experience often become the most faithful and God-connected people I have ever met. In the same way, I don't think having a transfiguration experience in and of itself is always a good thing. There are also dangers lurking in the experience.

I think there are many factors that go into why one person is blinded by the light of God while others struggle to hear the still small voice. Some of them are cultural,

some social, some upbringing. Each of us have different predispositions of awareness of things beyond our senses. Our emotional psyches also come into play, as well as other factors we still know nothing about. I don't think there is any doubt, for example that indigenous people have this gift (though some do not see it as a gift at all) more often than do Western Europeans.

But one factor that I believe is never in the mix is worthiness. I've known a fair number of people in my life that have described an event in their lives much like what Peter, James and John did today. Some had strong faith before the event, some had no faith at all. Some were brilliant people, some were mentally challenged. Some prayed every day, others never.

There also seems to be no connection between having one of the experiences and the depth of one's faith. I know people who I feel relatively certain have had valid transfiguration experiences, whose faith never matured at all. And of course I know many people who never experienced such an event, whose faith is as strong as we could imagine.

The key to transfiguration, as I see it, is never the event itself, but what happens to us as a result. In the movie clip, we see a positive reaction to a transfiguration experience. Jake sees the light and it moves him to take up an active faith. He forms the band and the purpose of the band, for those of you who have forgotten, or perished the thought, never seen *The Blues Brothers*, is to make enough money to pay the back taxes on an orphanage that is about to be shut down. His experience transforms him and spurs him to action to protect children.

That however, is not the only response to transfiguration. One of the great dangers is when someone understands the event as what we have come to term a born again experience. They see the light, they believe, and that moment is seen as the thing that allows them to be saved. For the rest of their life they see that event as solidifying their faith forever. When this happens, a transfiguration experience is not a wonderful gift, but is deadly to faith. It stops it cold in its tracks, seeing no need to develop it further.

I am reminded of the story Maya Angelou tells of the young adult woman who eagerly approached her, telling Maya that she was a Christian. Angelou responded, “already?”

When transfiguration or any Epiphany is understood as the once for all time experience, the moment we were saved, they do more harm than they do good. They stop our faith journey rather than encouraging it. We need to remember that there is a reason that Epiphany ends Tuesday and it is followed by Lent. After Epiphany comes living into our faith. Faith does not happen in the Epiphany, but rather in the journey of transformation that occurs in the non-fireworks time of Lent. Transfiguration experiences are great, but only if we see them as conduits to grow in our faith journey.

In a similar fashion, when we see worship as a vehicle for each of us to have a lightning bolt experience of God, we are seeing the purpose of what we do here exactly backwards. Some of us may very well have a powerful experience of God as a result of our worship experience, but this is not why we are here. We are not trying to create a mountain top experience for you on Sunday. Instead, our worship is meant to be a

springboard, a springboard to propel us out into the world to live into God's light, to spread God's light to others.

The other major danger that bright light Epiphanies conceal is the one that Peter points out in today's Gospel. Epiphanies are really cool. They are so cool that we never want to let go of them. Imagine having a personal experience of God this powerful. Just like Peter, who suggests that they set up some tents and stay there, all of us would love to bask in the glow of God with us forever. But this is never the point of transfiguration. The Greek word here is metamorphoses. Transfiguration is meant to change us, and we cannot change if we try to hold onto the glow of its ecstasy all the time. We see this desire to live in constant ecstasy even more prevalent in our world today. Through the vehicles of drugs and alcohol, we try to stay in our transfiguration experiences constantly. The result is physical and spiritual death.

Ecstatic epiphanies can only be fleeting. Any attempt to hold onto them terminates our faith journey. All of us must come down from the mountain, and inject ourselves back into the real world. And that, beloved, is where faith happens. Not in the Epiphanies, but in the place that the epiphanies lead us.

The good news then, this morning, is that if you have had a transfiguration experience in your own life, you have the great opportunity to reach the apex of faith. And if you have never had a spiritual Epiphany of any kind, you too have the great opportunity to reach the apex of faith. All of us can change. All of us can be transformed. And the vehicle for that transformation lies ahead in three days. The journey is about to begin. Together, let us journey into an even deeper faith. And

when these next 40 days are over, perhaps we too will be doing handstands up these aisles. Amen.