



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

February 22, 2009

The Last Sunday in Epiphany  
by Reverend Donna Barr

For the past two and a half days Alan and I have attended our Diocese Convention in Northern Kentucky. We also took with us our laity whom you voted to represent you from St. John's. Katherine Harper, Ron Moberly, Vickie Duff, Lisa Hawkins and Judi Sutherland. There was some discussion at the convention about the name of our larger church. Some said our name is The Protestant Episcopal Church and others said it is just The Episcopal Church. That is what most of us generally say.

Today is World Mission Sunday. The General Convention - governing body of our national church, reaffirmed in 1997 that every member of the Episcopal Church is a missionary and it called upon each parish to honor and celebrate its commitment to mission on the last Sunday of Epiphany. You may not know this -but ever since 1835 the term "the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society "has been incorporated into the name of our Church. Officially, we are The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Therefore, as members of St. John's we belong to a missionary society. "The mission of the Church," as stated in the Prayer Book, "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ... The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace, and love." Whether we realize it or not, our ministry here at St. John's Versailles, Ky. is part of the missionary work of the Church. In our prayer, our common worship, in our sharing the Gospel, and in our striving for justice and peace together we pursue the Church's mission. The call to seek and serve Christ in our community is a call to be a missionary.

Now, I'm not really sure how General Convention chose this Sunday, the last Sunday of Epiphany, to be the focus for mission. Today is always the day when we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. It doesn't seem like this story has much of

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anything to do with mission. But as I read it this time it not only connects but I think it has everything to do with mission and is especially poignant as we recommit ourselves to our missionary work at home.

Mark's version of the Transfiguration stands almost exactly at the mid-point of his Gospel. Until now Jesus has been preoccupied with his public ministry of healing and teaching. But on the mountain Jesus knows his focus must change. His eyes turn towards Jerusalem and the long journey to the cross begins. In scripture mountaintops are places where one encounters God. They are what the Celts considered as "thin places," where the divide between the human world and that of the Divine becomes very narrow. On this high mountain, Peter, James and John are witnesses to a dramatic moment where the divide between the human and divine narrows. Jesus' appearance is radically transformed before them- a moment which affirms Jesus' identity as the Messiah and reveals a glimpse of his true glory. Peter, awestruck and overwhelmed by the whole experience, feels compelled not only to say something, but to do something. He offers to build three booths in which to honor and commemorate this moment - to capture it forever. He may have wanted to prolong the experience by building these shrines so that he and the others would not have to go back down into the valley to their daily lives of discipleship. Yet, just as suddenly as Peter blurts out his request, he is silenced by an enveloping cloud and a voice coming from within it commanding him to listen to Jesus. In an instant, the experience has ended and the three are descending the mountain with Jesus unaware that in the valley ahead they would be following their Lord to the cross.

Commenting on this story, Sr. Joan Chittister, a widely renowned speaker and author, says, "In a gospel apparently about the mystical dimension of religion, there is a troubling, teeming undercurrent of turmoil, a struggle between piety and real Christianity, a struggle between religion for real and religion for show. The gospel shows us that Peter, in your name and mine, opted for piety. 'Let's settle down here, Jesus, and build three booths.' Peter was opting for a religion of temples,

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institutions and shrines. Peter was opting for a religion that transcends the world." We know that what Peter got was not a religion that transcended the world but a religion that involved the depths of human brokenness, the depths of human darkness-religion in the valley and not on the mountaintop. The event which follows the transfiguration attests to Peter's experience. Jesus takes the disciples away from the holy mountain into the valley below to a man whose son was possessed by a demon. Jesus leads them immediately into the world of human suffering and before long he will lead them to the cross, where his suffering and the world's suffering finally meet. Chittister goes on to say, "Real religion is not about building temples and keeping shrines. Real religion is about healing hurts, speaking for and being with the poor, the helpless, the voiceless and the forgotten who are at the silent bottom of every pinnacle. Real religion, the scripture insists, is not about transcending life; real religion is about our transforming life. It calls us to the Beatitudes, to the works of mercy, to the doing of miracles for those in need, to the being and act of irrational love and burning justice of God. That is what the Transfiguration is about, that is what religion is really about, changing ourselves so we can change the world."

Like Peter and the other disciples we do not get to stay up on the mountaintop and revel in the glory. Jesus' mission was not about transcending life and he would not allow his disciples' mission to be about it either. His mission and later his disciples' mission was about transforming the world by entering into the heart of its darkness. If we claim to be his followers, then it must be ours as well. We are called to be missionaries, missionaries of Christ and his Gospel. We tend to think missionaries are those remarkable few who serve Christ in far off foreign lands and among people of different cultures and tongues. But we don't have to go to Africa or India or Asia to do this. This became evermore real to me this past week-end at our convention. Visiting with my brothers and sisters from our "most in need parishes and ministries" again confirm the need to care for our own family so that then we can reach further in the community and beyond. We do this by seeking and serving Christ among our own neighbors, among those who sit in the pews behind us, among those whom we call

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family, among those with whom we work, share ministry with, and pray with. In the Bishop's address to the convention, he talked about the balancing of reality and hope. My friends the reality of our diocese is that many of us are actually among those who are poor, voiceless, hurting, and helpless.

It is so tempting to try and contain the glory of God by building our temples and by keeping our shrines. It is so tempting to opt for a pious religion which transcends the messiness of our lives and the pain of our world. It is so tempting to stay up on the mountaintop where it seems safe and risk-free. And it is so tempting to reach out to others far away but forget our own neighbor in need right in front of us. But this is not the faith and hope that we stake our lives on. The mountaintop does indeed show us a glimpse of the glory of God; but it is only by going down into the valley that we can truly experience it. So, go forth into world as missionaries.....go forth into the community in which you live.....go forth into your workplaces and schools and supermarkets -but never forget those in our own churches who need your hand, your prayers, your encouragement and your respect. The Gospel is for everyone....even for us!

Pray for our brothers and sisters in our own missions and small parishes and pray for our ministries in need especially for the mountain God has given to us at the Cathedral Domain; where so many lives have been transformed in Christ. Jesus is with us and he is leading the way. And yes, the journey with Jesus will lead us to the cross; but it will also lead us to new life and the glory of God and God's kingdom like we've never witnessed before.

Amen

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