

Today we celebrate the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. The word “epiphany” means “manifestation,” or “showing forth.” The theme of the Gospel is that its message shines forth into the world for all people, not just a select few. Today’s Gospel is one that strikes fear into the hearts of many preachers as they take on the task of explaining it. I don’t share that fear as I have absolutely no intention of trying to explain something that I believe is inexplicable. We are considering what has come to be known as the Transfiguration. So, let’s just enjoy the story.

Jesus took his friends, Peter and James and John, with him and went up on a mountain for a little R&R, to regroup after all of the time spent with crowds of people. All of a sudden, right before their eyes, Jesus is glowing white and with him are the figures of the prophet Isaiah and the lawgiver Moses, two of the greatest leaders of the people of Israel who had died many years before. As they stand there with their mouths open and their minds blown, a cloud passes overhead out of which comes a voice saying, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” Then, as quickly as it had started, it was over, and Jesus is telling them to keep quiet about this until he has risen from the dead.

What if you had been there to see this? Can you imagine what you’d be thinking and feeling? I think I would have been terrified, surprised, excited, and wondering what the heck was going on. As always, our dear friend Peter’s reaction is great. He suggests that they build some little shelters so everyone can settle in and stay for a while longer. It sounds as if Peter wanted to gain a little control over the situation. He wanted to “do” something.....*anything!*

I think our human response to mystery, like Peter’s, can be a very unhelpful one. We want to “do” something about it, don’t we? We want to solve it. When we encounter a mystery we want to figure it out, to explain it, to unwrap it so that the unknown is known and the hidden is revealed. This reaction comes from our strong human need to be in control. When you think about it, most of the world’s problems and relationship struggles are all about every person wanting to be in control, of the situation, of the other person, even of the future. Beginning with Adam and Eve, people want to be in control. That same strong need shapes the way we encounter mystery. Let’s say that you are reading an exciting and tense murder mystery. You continue page by page until the very end where you read, “And the murderer is.....” The end. Can you imagine the mail the author would get?

When we cannot explain a mystery. What do we do? We get upset and frustrated. Why? Because to accept a mystery without solving it means that we are not in control, and we just do not know what to do with that. Of course, we need some control in our lives or they would be total chaos. The problem is that we go too far. Think about how we go about solving a mystery. We hold it up against what we know, or believe, or what others have told us, and we try to make it fit. You can see what the result is. Our lives, including our relationships, are only as big as the limits and criteria we have set based on our present level of experience or knowledge or belief.

I think that it is quite likely that people reject God because they do not know how to handle mystery. Why is there suffering in the world if a loving God is in charge? Why does war continue to happen? Why don’t things go as well for me as they seem to for my neighbor, the one I don’t like? When no satisfactory answer is forthcoming as to the many “why’s” about God, they reject the possibility and delve no farther into the mystery. Do you see what the underlying principle is here? If God cannot fit into “my world view,” then I will just discount the whole idea. Some people with this position may even go to church, but the expectation that they might encounter a life-changing mystery in a relationship with God is not anything they hope for nor look for. They have denied themselves the possibility of encountering a new

truth because it is a mystery. In effect, what they are saying is that they will accept God as long as they can understand God. Incredible. They are actually putting themselves on equal footing with Almighty God.

Some of the most meaningful events in life are mysterious. We have all had those moments which stand out in our minds for reasons we can't really explain; that night by the ocean, that time on top of the mountain, the morning I learned that my friend had died, sitting on the back porch watching the sunset, the time I laid my eyes on my first child, that night I couldn't sleep because I was so worried. We've probably all seen that picture with a strobe light where in that split second a drop of milk splashing looks like a beautiful, graceful crown, and then it is gone.

Our mysterious encounters with the living God can be like that. They are flashes of insight, or awareness, or presence, and then they are gone. We ask ourselves, "was that real?" "Did that really happen?" "Was that my imagination?" Emily Dickenson once wrote, "the truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind." She was right. We could not stand the whole truth of God all at once as it would scare us and overwhelm us as we would be completely out of control. But if we are ever to become the people our Creator intends, we must let go of control long enough to allow ourselves to be dazzled by the incredible mystery of God.

Remember what the voice from the cloud said to Jesus' disciples that day on the top of the mountain? It said, "This is my beloved Son, listen to him." Pretty simple, "listen to him." We humans can do a lot of things, but do you know what we can't do? We cannot be trying to control something and also *listening*. To listen requires that we are not in control. If we do listen to Jesus, what is the message? He tells us to love God and our neighbor. What we will discover is that love and control are mutually exclusive; we cannot do both at the same time. That is why it is so difficult for many of us to really give up and receive love. Jesus calls us to learn how to give up control and to simply "be" in the presence of another, God first, and then, based on that relationship, with other people.

Tough work! As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called and challenged to a lifelong commitment to being a little bit out of control. We are called to allow ourselves to simply "be" in the presence of the mystery that is God. Not to analyze, not to figure out, not to argue about, just to "be." When we do allow ourselves to be vulnerable we will be open to encountering God on God's terms, not our own. We must remember that mystery simply means something we cannot explain, and if we reach the point where we understand God, we have created something in our own image. Do not let other people, no matter how well-meaning, tell you all about God so there is no more mystery. God is beyond our reach, far beyond human understanding. What is not a mystery is God's view of you and me. Through Jesus Christ we know that this all-powerful, beyond our understanding God, loves each of us with an undeserved and uncompromised love. He has lovingly touched us in little revealing moments throughout our lives just as surely as he did with Peter and James and John that day on the mountaintop. But, unless we are willing to give up control long enough to listen, we may never know it.