



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Last Sunday in Epiphany (B)

#### Incomprehension

[RCL] 2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” These words from the creation story are recalled in the reading today from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. The apostle writes, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

In our everyday language, the word “epiphany” is often associated with knowledge. It is often used to signal those lightbulb moments when the fog of incomprehension gives way to understanding. The season of Epiphany, however, shows that human understanding and comprehension of the Divine cannot happen at the flip of a switch.

In early 2022, a new simulation of the universe’s origins using massive computing power allowed scientists to explore what might have happened in the earliest days of the universe’s creation. In the early days after the Big Bang, for the first 150 million years or so, light could not travel very far at all. Physicist Aaron Smith explains, “It’s a bit like water in ice cube trays; when you put it in the freezer, it does take time, but after a while, it starts to freeze on the edges and then slowly creeps in. This was the same situation in the early universe — it was a neutral, dark cosmos that became bright and ionized as light began to emerge from the first galaxies.”

In today’s readings, the light and illumination of understanding the Divine is a bit like that light at the cosmic dawn. Comprehension is not instantaneous. Even when the revelation of God descends in a moment of transfiguration, a whirlwind, or a chariot of fire, it takes humans time and space to understand and respond.

It is the last Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany. Epiphanytide begins with the visit of the magi, continues with the baptism of Jesus, and carries on telling stories of divine manifestation (or theophanies) in the mystery of the Incarnation. From the Greek word meaning “appearance,” the season of Epiphany continues the celebration after Christmastide, highlighting those moments of divinity among humanity in the life and ministry of Jesus.

The last Sunday after the Epiphany always tells the story of the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration is a mysterious event. All three Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, include this story in their accounts. While there are small differences that reflect each author's particular interests and literary styles, the main thrust of the story remains the same across these three tellings: Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up a high mountain and is transfigured before them. Moses and Elijah show up, and a voice from above instructs the disciples that Jesus is God's son and commands the hearers to listen to him. Mark, in furthering his theme of secrecy and the disciples' misunderstanding, includes Jesus' followers questioning among themselves what Jesus meant when he spoke of rising from the dead.

The story is miraculous and mysterious. Fortunately, if one is confused as a 21st-century hearer of the text, there is a small comfort in the fact that those present at the event were just as confused. Indeed, one of the themes that weaves the lectionary readings for today together highlights the human confusion that comes before understanding.

In the gospel account, Peter asks if he should construct booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Biblical commentators have pointed out the comedy of this impulse. Surrounded by glory, light, and brilliance, Peter shows himself to be thoroughly human. The transcendent light stands in stark contrast to the metaphorical darkness that shrouds Peter's and the other disciples' understanding. They simply do not comprehend what is happening around them. Even when standing face-to-face with the glory of the Divine, there is a lack of cognizance of what is going on. There is a lack of recognition of what one ought to do.

This lack of understanding echoes the story from 2 Kings. Elijah, like Jesus, is preparing to depart this world. He has his own disciple, Elisha, accompanying him. Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay behind, and three times Elisha refuses: "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." Finally, the pair come to the Jordan River. Elijah takes his mantle, rolls it up, and strikes the water. The waters part, and the two cross on dry land. Elisha asks Elijah for a double portion of his spirit, and Elijah replies, "If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you." The chariots of fire come, and Elisha sees Elijah taken up in a whirlwind into heaven.

While the reading for the day ends there, the story is not quite over. Elisha turns to the Jordan River, takes Elijah's mantle, and just like his teacher, strikes the water. And nothing happens. He then says, "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah? Where is he?" He takes the rolled-up cloak and hits the water again. This time, the water parts as it had before, and Elisha crosses to the other side.

In this story, Elisha sees the glory of God firsthand, up close and personal. He sees the miracle of miracles, his mentor and teacher being taken up to heaven. And still, he does not have it all figured out. His first step without his teacher is to falter. He hits the water and nothing happens. In the next few verses, a group of prophets pressures him into searching for Elijah in the desert. His ministry as a prophet starts off ineffective and with uncertainty.

Elisha is profoundly human. While he may have a double portion of the divine spirit, he starts off like so many of us do: with uncertainty, doubts, and misunderstanding. Just like those three disciples on that mount. The glory of God is revealed, and the human response is incomprehension.

In a way, all Christians are still finding their way through that haze of confusion and incomprehension in the wake of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Many of us may, like those disciples in Mark, be asking each other, “What do these things mean?” Is God truly at work in the world? In the suffering, in the cross, in the loss? Perhaps our 21st-century questions might differ slightly. What does it mean to hold to a faith with miraculous and supernatural stories such as these?

However we answer these questions, God gives the light of understanding. And like that primordial light at the dawn of the universe, the light of divine comprehension does not always illuminate in an instant. The stories from today and throughout the tapestry of Holy Scripture witness the truth that misapprehension and faltering steps are a natural, normal, and human response to the revelation of God’s glory. However, as we move together, responding to each other and the world around us, that light becomes more and more clear as it spreads within our individual and communal lives.

God shows up in blazing glory. And God is the one who allows us to comprehend what the divine mysteries might mean. And as slow as we might be to comprehend the divine light, we can trust that it is still there, moving, transforming, and redeeming us all. Amen.

*Michael Toy is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington studying digital religion in New Zealand. He also serves as public theologian for the Student Christian Movement Aotearoa.*