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Epiphany Transfiguration B
Peace, Seattle
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March 9:2-9

LIKE MOTHS TO A FLAME

We left the twisting highway along the Klamath River and climbed upward through the forest on logging roads that traced the mountain's form.

Looping in and out and in again we ascended higher and further until the road petered out. Then we parked and continued on foot, hiking slowly until we reached the rounded top of the mountain.

This was Northwest California's High Country, the place where, for millennia, men and women from local Tribes had come to seek visions and an encounter with the spiritual world.

A Karuk elder and mentor had brought me here because she wanted to share something important.

When this forest high above Katamin—the Center of the World—was set to be logged some months before, she'd come to this mountaintop with others from her Tribe to fast and to pray and—if necessary—to defy the bulldozers with her body in order to protect this holy place.

And her prayers were heard. The logging ceased. And during those days of prayer and fasting on the mountain she'd been given a vision: A great bow in the sky, people of every race coming together under brilliant light. It sounded, as she spoke it, like something straight out of Isaiah.

The vision was an affirmation to her that this place on which she'd stood—on which we were now standing—was more than a stand of merchantable timber; it was holy ground.

I learned in a <u>new way</u> that day that some things cannot be <u>explained</u>…they can only be <u>experienced</u>. And if we try to dissect them, to take them apart, to break them down into component pieces, we only diminish them…diminish them and still end up missing their meaning.

Two such encounters with the Divine greet us this morning—the first, from <u>Kings</u>, tells of Elijah passing on his mantle to Elisha, and ascending to the heavens in a chariot of fire.

The second, from Mark, tells of Jesus <u>transfigured</u> before Peter, James and John, a sacred rendezvous with Elijah and Moses, and the Divine Voice on the Mountain of Transfiguration.

Both of these episodes are shot through with mystery, and we come away with a sense that those who stewarded these stories <u>struggled mightily</u> to convey with human language what <u>no</u> human tongue <u>could</u> convey—the unfathomable reality of the God of light and of cloud both manifest and yet hidden.

In holy moments like these, when heaven and earth meet and a sacred window opens just long enough for us to catch a glimpse of the Eternal, words fail us.

Yet still we try! For in that hallowed instant we see farther and deeper and with more clarity than we've ever seen before.

The Scriptures record many such moments, moments which God's people shared, sifted, tested, and deemed worthy of passing on.

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The fancy term is THEOPHANY: a "God sighting;" a moment when the Sacred breaks into the mundane, and an experience of the Holy leads us to cry: SURELY THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE![1]

Our ancient Hebrew forebears had a word for this—Shekinah: God's manifested glory.

Moses experienced it; Elijah too. What did they find? When you're [fingers] this close to God, everything changes. What was muddled becomes clarified; impossibilities dissolve.

We're not very good at living with mystery nowadays. We prefer skepticism.
The idea that God (if we believe in God at all) would choose to reveal Godself in a way that is beyond our ability to comprehend offends us. How dare God do that!

These stories from Scripture raise plenty of questions for skeptics. The irony is, we're not so much invited to analyze them as we are invited to marvel.

The transfigured Jesus standing before us this morning isn't supposed to be figured out—we're meant to be drawn to him, like moths to the flame![2]

Mark's gospel begins with a prior God-sighting—at Jesus' baptism. But it's not clear then that anyone else sees the heavens torn apart or the Holy Spirit diving down.

The Voice that sounds from heaven is for Jesus' alone to hear. YOU ARE MY SON, MY BELOVED. Nothing is public or obvious.[3]

But today on the mountain that heavenly Voice speaks to all the witnesses: to Peter, James, and John: THIS IS MY SON, MY BELOVED, LISTEN TO HIM!

We might even say that Jesus, his transfigured garments shimmering like shook foil, insists on being seen.[4] And see him they do. And they are terrified.

In Mark's Gospel, a story full of concealment and secrecy, this mountaintop scene teaches us that this Jesus has plans to be conspicuous.[5]

What does he plan to be conspicuous about?

He announces it in the verses just before our appointed ones:
- That the Way set before him will unfold through suffering and death first, before glory.
- That following him into fullness of life with God means giving up on trying to save ourselves.
- That for resurrection to become reality a death is first required.

And there's the rub. We all want to get to resurrection, but we'd rather not die first.
Staying on the mountain, bathed in light—maybe building a few lean-to's—that would be awesome!

But to do so would be to misappropriate the message. The enduring glory will come, but not yet. Now it is time to head down the mountain and back to this life.

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[1] Genesis Jacob
[2] Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark, @ Working Preacher.org
[3] Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark, @ Working Preacher.org
[4] Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), 42. Quoted in Working Preacher, op. cit.
[5] Matt Skinner, Commentary on Mark, @ Working Preacher.org

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And so perhaps the question we're left with is:
What of our experience on the mountain do we carry with us, as we head back down the hill?

And the answer can only be, we look to Jesus as our light, and we follow him.

We make his Way our way. We make his pattern for reaching and including and loving our pattern for reaching and including and loving. And we keep our eyes and our ears open because you never know where our crucified and risen One will show up next.

As Jesus and his apprentices head back down the mountain, Jesus does something strange—something he's done several times before as Mark tells it—Jesus orders Peter, James and John not to tell a soul about what they've seen UNTIL THE SON OF MAN HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD.

What does Jesus mean by this? Simply put, he's saying:

> "What you just experienced won't be understandable, won't be complete, until after the suffering, rejection, and death; until after I am raised from the dead."

This is the story we are called to carry within us, trusting that the light which has shone in our hearts will shine through this life and mission we share, so that neighbors, classmates, teachers, colleagues, family and friends see the bright face of Jesus reflected in who we've become and are drawn, like us, to his flame.

The meal set before us this morning is part of that story, part of that legacy. Gathered at Christ's Table we eat and drink his vision of a world whole and complete, and when we leave here, we leave to be his Body in the world; carrying the memory, the vision, the light within us. Never knowing when or where it might break out again, or shine through in a transforming moment.

Amen.