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Epiphany Last, Year B, February 15, 2015  
2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50:1-6, 2 Corinthians 4:3-6, Mark 9:2-9

“Salvation or Transformation? The Same?”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

The Collect for today—this last Sunday of Epiphany—what we might think of as a transition Sunday into the season of Lent—is made up of rich and powerful words—but words that can feel elusive or describe a vision that feels so far removed from our everyday lives that we can hardly do more with them than let them go in one ear and out the other. I’m wondering how many of us even remember listening to them as they were read a few short minutes ago. Are they only nice religious language—or do they describe something that we could or would hope to attain to? “O God, who before the passion of your only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.” Where do we begin to decipher the meaning of those words? How do we or could we possibly hope to enter into such a deep relationship with God that we, like Peter and James and John, might know for ourselves the experience of seeing God’s glory revealed—that we might see the face of Jesus Christ and behold and recognize its light—that we might be sustained in living our lives to the full and know ourselves changed into his likeness—for his greater and greater glory? Could those words possibly speak a deeply meaningful message to us or to other twenty-first century seekers? Or, is there other language—are there other words—

that could communicate the meaning of what we are attempting to talk about more clearly in our post-modern world? Is there a point, and do we have words or courage for speaking of the “glory of God” in 2015? We may feel a bit apologetic to even be trying.

Many twenty-first century Christian thinkers are telling us that, if we want to be part of the renewal and flourishing of the church rather than letting it become a quaint relic of a bygone age and culture, we have to look deeply at what our religion is really about and find language that can communicate its principles and beliefs and implications in today’s vernacular rather than expecting that people might begin flocking to our doors and be willing to study and learn an archaic language in order to converse with us or find relevance in the words that we use in our readings and prayers and hymns and chants—even in our sermons. Our only alternative to offering language lessons is to translate the church’s message into one that makes sense and feels relevant to what goes on outside our doors. Personally, I left the church for about twenty years in my twenties and thirties for exactly that reason—I could no longer see the relevance. I deeply believed in a loving God, but through various experiences became disillusioned with the church’s ability to be life-giving or even of significant redeeming value in the world. I am grateful that numerous factors converged that eventually led me back—this time to a particular Episcopal Church with a particular Rector whose sermons were like balm for a wounded warrior. It was good to finally be home—in my new home.

A couple of weeks ago, we lost one of our primary progressive Christian voices with the death of Marcus Borg. Borg had spent decades teaching and speaking and writing about this very issue of communicating with the world. The titles of some of his many books leave no question about their subject—for example, Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The

Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith, Speaking Christian: How Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power—and How They Can Be Restored and The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith. Borg had a passion for God as we can know God through the Christian faith, and he left us a rich legacy for us to use in spreading the gospel message—the good news.

One of the words that Borg attempted to restore is the word “salvation.” The church uses that word more than frequently—but the world doesn’t use it at all—and doesn’t understand or embrace it. A complete newbie to Christianity is more than likely not thinking about or concerned about the afterlife—about where he or she will spend eternity. The concern is “what about now?” The concern is about finding meaning now—knowing love and peace and freedom now—creating a better world now—being part of something bigger than ourselves now. The concern is not about salvation as it emerged in more recent centuries, but about salvation as it was understood biblically and throughout our first ten-plus centuries of Judeo-Christian heritage and history—salvation as liberation from bondage, returning home from exile, being healed and made whole—healing and making whole, knowing fullness of life, living lives of compassion and justice, creating the kingdom of God on this earth rather than waiting for the “sweet bye and bye.” And so, Borg suggested that, rather than using the word “salvation,” we use the word “transformation.” God is in the business of transformation—of growing us and changing us and converting us over and over—freeing us—that we might become more Christ-like, having been created in God’s own image. It’s hard work and we don’t arrive once and for all this side of death. But, we find our joy in the journey—the pilgrimage—allowing ourselves to grow in intimacy with God—falling more deeply in love with God—allowing God not only to transform

us, but to transfigure us—so that, in the depths of who we are, we shift into a different comprehension of our identity and our lives, letting go of who we have thought we were—who the world has told us we were—and becoming who God has known we were all along—acknowledging our true Source and our true nature.

Last Epiphany, or Transfiguration Sunday, is an important day for Christians. After all, it's on our liturgical calendar twice each year, and the story of the transfiguration is included in all three of the synoptic gospels. But, is there any way of saying with accuracy what the word transfiguration means? It's not exactly the same thing as transformation, but they are related terms. It's not exactly the same thing as metamorphosis, but they, too, are related terms. One commentator calls transfiguration “shape-shifting”—but it's clearly not shape-shifting of the monster or werewolf variety. Transfiguration is more like awakening—awakening to what already is—becoming aware of a level of truth that opens up new horizons—changing the vision of what we had formerly accepted as reality, no matter how constricted it might have been—creating new meanings and new possibilities. There is no going back from this type of awakening. It is life-altering. We may forget periodically—we may hit the snooze button from time to time—but, once we have had a vision of who we are in relation to God, nothing else will ever satisfy. And it's all for the glory of God.

The second century Bishop of Lyons, St. Irenaeus, is often remembered for his stunning words, “The glory of God is a human person fully alive.” We are quite certain that Irenaeus did not live at a time when depth psychology was even a vague or remote idea, but he knew something about humanity's unique connection to the Divine and about our unique gift of consciousness and awareness. How ironic it is that—almost 2000 years after Irenaeus—we

would be struggling to hold on to what is so basic to our humanity—that we would be reading books and going to seminars and spending time practicing how to be present, how to be mindful, how to be fully alive. We will never master the art of being human.

Quickly we will be thrust into the Lent. As we approach Ash Wednesday, some of us are thinking about how we might observe a holy Lent this year—thinking about what we will let go of or what we will take on during this season of preparation. Lenten disciplines are about deepening our relationship with the ground and source of our being. It is our time to go to the mountain, at least metaphorically—to go to that place, whether it be an inner place or an outer place, where we know that we are close to God, where we can hear God speak—where we can see, for the first time or even the thousandth time, who the living Christ is in our lives and in our hearts. Lenten disciplines are about preparing ourselves to be able to participate more deeply and more fully in the events of Holy Week—that we might be transfigured—that we might know that we are made in the image of God and being changed into the likeness of Christ—that we might embody the light and know ourselves in a new way—that we might follow that path through Jerusalem into new life. And all for the glory—not of ourselves, because we can't do it ourselves—all for the glory of God. Amen.