

## **Sight and Sound and Why We Come to Church**

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St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 11, 2024: Year B

*2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9*

Twenty-five years ago, St. David's became a richer and lovelier place because in 1999, Clair Rozier accepted our call to become our Director of Music. I feel that phrase, "our call" very keenly, because I am the only person on the current clergy staff who was here in 1999—although at the time, I was not clergy. But 25 years ago, my three children were in the children's choirs—and my mother was a member of the music discernment committee who met and interviewed candidates! We will have opportunities to honor and thank Clair throughout this her anniversary year, but today, let's think about the importance of the music. Clair did not invent church music, of course! But for 25 years, she has directed us toward the mystery of God through our auditory senses.

Here at St. David's, we say that our mission is to "know God in Jesus Christ and to make Christ known to others." As mission statements go, it's a pretty good one—but it strikes me that it might lead us to make the mistake of thinking that a relationship with the one, true, living God is all up in our heads—that it is all about intellectual or even historical knowledge, and not about anything else.

Our intellects are important of course, but with St. Valentine's Day looming ahead this week, we remember that there are many ways to know someone—and that our hearts and our senses are at least as important as our heads as we meet and build relationships. I have noticed a lot of advertisements for this coming Wednesday. What are you going to buy for your loved one to show them how much you love them? And I notice that much of what we buy to celebrate Valentine's Day is shiny! Chocolate in gleaming foil, and bright flowers delivered on gray wintry days, and jewelry: silver, and gold, and glittering gems. I have even seen the suggestion to use glitter instead of ashes on this Valentine's Day that coincides with Ash Wednesday. The shininess of gifts of love—the gleam and glitter, catches my attention on this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, because Epiphany is the season of shininess.

Our lessons today do not disappoint. We have Elijah riding to heaven on the chariot of fire. We have Jesus, with his clothes *dazzling*. And Paul tells us that the light of God shines in our own hearts.

In today's first reading, Elisha, the young protégé, will not let Elijah, the wise old prophet, die, because he cannot bear to let him go. He wants to stay with his beloved mentor, who has taught him so much. He thinks he cannot face this loss. But finally, knowing that Elijah must go, he begs for a blessing, a *double share* of Elijah's spirit. *Elijah and Elisha both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.*

Elisha never actually sees Elijah's death—but he sees brightness carry him away—as though he is being carried on a chariot of fire. And we will learn that the fire of that chariot shines through Elisha's life.

I have stood in the River Jordan at just the place that where tradition tells us Elijah's mantle struck the water. Today, it would have to do more than part the water, it would have to lift the rope that marks the border between Israel and Jordan and obliterate the signs that warn you not to cross. When you stand there, you can understand why Elijah wouldn't want to simply walk through the river—though it is barely larger than a creek at this point, the water is cold and full of murky yellow mud. And tradition tells us that not only is this the place that Elisha begged for a double blessing from his predecessor, the greatly flawed prophet Elijah, this is also the place where Jesus knelt to receive baptism from his cousin, the crazy, locust-eating John the Baptist.

In his very first chapter, Mark tells us the story of Jesus being baptized in the river Jordan. *And, Mark tells us, just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:10-11).* And the heavens open and God touches us here on earth—and the light shines as if on the wing of a bird in the brilliant daylight. When God touches the earth, Jesus hears the voice of our loving God.

Mark doesn't tell us that the people who witnessed the baptism saw the shining dove or heard the voice—but only that Jesus did. The light of God in that story is a personal epiphany—it is a confirmation for Jesus that he is doing the right thing. We can almost see the light shining on the wing of that bird, and if we know the story of Elijah, we can even feel the cold mud on our feet, but what did the voice of God sound like? Don't you wish you could hear it?

In *today's* story from Mark's Gospel, the voice of God will sound again, but not before we see the light. And we are not the only ones who see it. Peter and James and John are there too, witnesses to the light that comes from Jesus himself: *And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.* God's presence becomes known first in the strange shininess of their dear friend and then in an overshadowing cloud, *and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* For Peter and James and John, the presence of God is known in the dazzle and the cloud and the voice, and it is terrifying.

And so, Peter speaks out in a kind of befuddled, addled way—*it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.* Peter and James and John do not know what is happening, and although Mark tells us it was terrifying, still, they do not want it to end. Their tradition taught them that Moses and Elijah were alive in heaven—that is, neither Moses nor Elijah experienced earthly death. Remember, Elijah was quite alive in Elisha's sight when he rode to heaven on a chariot of fire. Maybe Peter, James, and John have followed Jesus up a mountain and into heaven. Perhaps if they put up some shelters, they will be able to hold on to this moment.

And then *from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* And it is the same voice when God sees Jesus the man being baptized and when God beholds Jesus transfigured in God's own glory.

It is no wonder to me that Peter wanted to hold on to the moment, to build a shelter and hold them in. Because here is the thing, if that voice from heaven is true, if what Peter and James and John see in that dazzling light is really there—then Peter and James and John are standing there in the presence of God. And they can hear God’s voice! Let’s build a tent right now!

*Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.* And Jesus led them back down the mountain. I have been there, too, riding up and then down that scary mountain, the one tradition calls the Mount of Transfiguration, on a narrow path in a bumpy little bus. And let me tell you, it could not have been an easy climb, up or down. The vegetation is sharp and scrubby. The rocks are plentiful. The way is steep. And yet, being with Jesus was worth it. Because time after time the disciples found that when they were with Jesus, they were with God. They could see it in the shininess. They could feel it in the cold mud and rocky mountainside. And they could hear it in God’s voice.

And so, they returned to the real world with Jesus, and tried to learn what he would have them do. And we have struggled to follow Jesus ever since. That is what Paul is talking about in our second lesson today. He is writing to a group of people who have already become a church. They know the power of the mission to know God in Jesus Christ and make Christ known to others. And yet, they are a group of people who live in the real world. They live in a culture that seeks its own pleasure, a place where *the god of this world has blinded* them to the light of God. And they live in a profoundly unequal culture, where wealth and political power go hand in hand, and some folks have much, but many more have little. Sound familiar?

But Paul challenges them and us to hold fast to this truth: *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.*

And that is why, all these millennia later, we are here today—gathered around the water of baptism, participating in the beauty of the church’s music brought to us by Clair and Elaine and all of these choirs, and sharing together in Eucharist. To be sure, the floor around our font is not yellow with mud as is the bank of the Jordan. And the voice of God is not as focused and directive as they heard on that mountain.

We are here today because we recognize that the Presence of God is with us in our worship. The glory of God is with us in the waters of baptism and the sound of the music and the taste of bread and wine. And it is God’s presence that nourishes us and strengthens us and gives us the knowledge for our mission in the world.