

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 14, 2021 (Last Epiphany, Year B)

I know someone who used to always insist that she was “great in a crisis.” I had no reason to doubt this because, well, I’d never been with her when a crisis struck. I’d never been with her during a massive earthquake or when someone came in to rob a bank and yelled at everyone to get down or when the brakes failed on the car she was driving. Since I was never with her during a crisis, and hoped I never would be, I took her at her word.

Until I ended up being with her during a crisis. It was a medical emergency. An older family member ate something too quickly at an anniversary party and started choking. It was, frankly, frightening. And in those first frantic moments, a doctor friend who happened to be there, saw the commotion, rushed to her side, calmly took over the situation, cleared the passage, and stayed with her until the paramedics arrived. He literally saved this woman’s life.

The person who always claimed to be great in a crisis, however, decidedly was not. She basically walked in circles and started babbling nonsense. She didn’t have the wherewithal to call 911. She certainly didn’t know what to *do*. In a word, she was a mess.

Now I’m not judging her. In similar high stress situations, many people simply freeze or behave irrationally. When Bryna’s water broke with our first child, I inexplicably went to the stove and started boiling water. I think I saw a midwife do that on some period TV show. And while I was fiddling with the knobs, Bryna calmly picked up the phone and called the doctor’s office.

The woman who claimed to be good in a crisis but was not, and my reaction in a dizzying, emotionally fraught moment, reminds me of the disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ transfiguration. Peter, James, and John had hiked up the mountain with Jesus only to be stunned and even paralyzed by a glimpse of Jesus in all his glory. We hear that as Jesus stood before them, “his clothes became dazzling white.” In Matthew’s account, we learn that Jesus’ “face shone like the sun.” And two of the great prophets of old, Moses and Elijah, suddenly appear as well.

The disciples’ reaction to this is perfectly normal and certainly quite human. Slightly comical, perhaps, as they dramatically fling themselves to the ground. And Peter’s offer to make three “dwellings,” is an absurd, deer-caught-in-the-headlights moment; an impulse to do something, *anything*, in the midst of confusing circumstances. It was basically the equivalent of boiling water for no apparent reason.

Fear is often our natural reaction to things that defy comprehension or logical explanation. Fear of the unknown or a discomfort with the mystical can lead to irrational behavior. Sometimes an encounter with the supernatural leads to questioning, anger, or even the reliance on a cynical rationality. In the face of mystery, we seek concrete answers. And while critical thinking is a God-given gift to humanity, it often drives the fear that stands as an obstacle to faith. An insistence that unless we ourselves have all the answers, truth cannot possibly exist.

So we want to study the physics of *how* Jesus could have possibly walked on water, while ignoring the broader invitation to contemplate the divine presence in our midst. We want to parse the whirlwind that swept Elijah up to heaven, instead of reveling in the relationship that brings earth to heaven and heaven to earth. We want to know the science behind Jesus’ transfiguration, how exactly his face shone and his clothes became dazzling white, rather than reflecting upon the gift of wonder and awe that comes from such a glimpse of glory.

The Transfiguration is ultimately a story, not of theatrics or special effects or God just showing off, but of identity. The three disciples are offered a great gift: a glimpse of Jesus in his resurrection glory; a foretaste of what is to come. Jesus’ divinity literally comes shining forth as he is transfigured before their very eyes. It’s as fleeting as it is dazzling. And they’ll need to hold onto this glimpse of glory as they head back down the mountain, back down to reality, back down to face the crucifixion that is to come.

This brief season of the church year, this Season after Epiphany, begins with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and ends with the mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration. And these weeks lead us into a deeper understanding of Jesus’ identity, mission, and purpose. From birth to baptism to the call of the first disciples to the revelation on that holy mountain, this journey is literally an epiphany of identity. From God’s message to Jesus as he emerges from the waters of baptism, “You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well-pleased” to God’s message to us as Jesus emerges from the glow of glory, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him.” We see that Jesus is not just human, not just a holy teacher, not just an advocate for the oppressed, but the only-begotten Son of God, the anointed one of God, the Messiah. Jesus comes into the world as God’s very self, not just with ideas for how to create a better world, but with a divine mandate that wills it into being.

As we move into Lent, we will journey from today’s mountaintop to tomorrow’s wilderness. From the grand vista of the risen Christ in all his glory, to our Lord’s temptation and ultimately to the agony of the cross. We will get back to the mountaintop, but not before first traveling through the valleys of our faith. It is in these very valleys that Jesus walks alongside us; even amid the

specter of the shadow of death. He comforts us and reaches out to us, just as he comforts and reaches out to Peter, James, and John in their terror and uncertainty and bewilderment up on that holy mountain. And then he accompanies them back down the mountain. Back to the work at hand; back to sharing the good news of peace; back to the transforming work of offering justice and dignity for all people.

I invite you to allow the bright light of the Transfiguration to illuminate your own journey. To heed God's call to *listen* to Jesus. Oh, we'll stumble along the way. We'll make mistakes and get it wrong. We'll mess things up and act irrationally. We'll hurt others and ourselves. We'll let fear of divine relationship cloud our judgment and close our hearts. We'll boil water for no apparent reason.

But the story of the Transfiguration reminds us to allow Jesus to touch you, to lift you up, to walk with you down the mountain of glory and into the wilderness of Lent. Let him accompany you to the very foot of the cross. And from the shadow of the cross right back to the bright light of resurrection glory.