Sermon on the Last Sunday of Epiphany 2017

There’s a great scene in the recent Netflix show *The Crown*, in which the Queen Mother is vacationing on the coast in northern Scotland at a friend’s estate; it’s several years after the death of her husband, King George.

The cinematography is magnificent as it juxtaposes Scotland’s rugged windswept coastline with the solitary figure walking the beach in her grief and solitude. The existential statement is powerful. No one, rich, poor, powerful or poor is exempt from searing loss.

At some point the Queen mother glimpses a large estate in the distance, precariously perched right at the edge of a bluff. She hikes over and finds that the place is rundown; the place resonates with grief, grief she identifies with; she meets the owner and begins negotiations to buy the place.

Some visits later they are walking on the beach together back towards her friend’s estate when two royal officials, who’ve been desperately trying to find her, stumble down a sandy embankment in their loafers while trying to maintain their dignity, “mum may we please have a word.”

It’s at that moment that the penny drops and the gentleman who owns the precariously perched castle recognizes her.

Western civilization loves stories like this. We love the idea that there might be among us, someone who becomes famous, a secret princess or prince either already or in the making; and we’d be right, but more on that in a minute

The Ur source of these stories is of course the Christian story: John’s gospel says, “He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.”

If that were the end of the story, that line could not be written, the line can only be written, because at some point, the penny drops, there is recognition, more than that there is faith and transformation.

The season of Epiphany is the season of the Church Year in which we celebrate this penny-dropping reality; we celebrate that it happens, how it happens and why, including the fact that without it, humans remain in a kind of profound darkness.

But, thank God, John’s gospel prologue also says, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!”

The Tradition has assigned the story of the Transfiguration to the Last Sunday after Epiphany for several important reasons.

It is a climax of sorts. It is the epitome of the “light stories:” from the star leading the Magi to the toddler in Bethlehem, to one of Jesus’ most unlikely lines, uttered in the direction of his ragtag followers: “You are the Light of the world,” to now, in this story, all the emanations as it were, coming together in a dazzling display of Light.

It’s an interesting climax, probably not the one we expect. People have suggested that here, it is the divinity of Christ that is revealed but in Luke’s account both Moses and Elijah are shining as well so, at least in the early tradition it doesn’t seem to have meant that.

A better clue is found a few chapters earlier here in Matthew when Jesus says that all God’s people will shine like stars in God’s kingdom. This is a central revelation of the New Testament which wants to say that people are glorious and that Jesus’ humanity provides the template for the glory which all people will day share.

It’s an interesting climax in another way as well: the point of God’s revelation is not to freeze the moment, join hands and sing kumbaya.

In other words it’s not like the climax of a novel or short story in which now all we have left is the denouement. We see this already in the First Testament reading.

Moses went up the mountain to worship God, yes. There is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian vision an understanding of the *mysterium tremendum*, as I was saying this past Sunday: the awesome mystery that both frightens, repels and attracts; that reminds us that there’s a whole lot more to the world and its meaning than what I bring to the dance. But this experience of God is not the end of the story, even though it is a climax of sorts.

What Moses brought back from the mountain was the real world civic code that would lead Israel not only from the wilderness, eventually, but into Canaan but from there to found monotheism and change the way the world relates to God, change the way we understand all things, actually.

The magi may have wanted to stay in the hut with the toddler and the Holy Family; I mean this was their “the penny drops” moment; their recognition of God’s presence in their midst; the climax of their journey; but no sooner had they presented their gifts when they were warned that their journey was not over and that from now on it wasn’t going to be friendly but dangerous!

Here on the mount, Peter wants to revel in the revelation, wants to hold on to the moment; the sheer amazingness of it all; understandably so!

But right here at the moment when the glory of the mosaic and prophetic tradition is vindicated; when the blazing light illumines the glory and destiny of the humanity God envisioned, desires and hopes for what seems like the ultimate climax is revealed as only a bridge.

For, indeed, if this vision will come to anything like reality in Peter and his compatriots, in us, and in the wider world, the *mysterium tremendum*, the awesome frightful and yet intoxicating moment must give way to further journey: “this is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

This will be so important for we, like Peter, like the Magi, like the children of Israel before, want to stay camping beside or on the mountain. But God is determined to continue the journey, to go to Jerusalem and face what needs to be faced, alone, so that all our false stopping points can finally be exposed so that the journey doesn’t end with just a few of us being privileged with spiritual experiences but so that the whole world may find themselves in this picture!

That’s why, finally, the transfiguration is not *the* climax for God even as it foreshadows what the divine desire is for everyone!

Early Christians believed that if you wanted to see God, yes, there was more than a hint here, but ultimately, strangely, you needed to hold in your mind the contrasts offered by the ongoing journey as Jesus and his uncomprehending followers make their way towards Jerusalem, a journey we join every year in Lent.

Here on the mountain Jesus is revealed in glory; there on the hill Jesus will be revealed in shame.

Here his clothes are shining, there his clothes will be stripped from his body caked in blood

Here he is flanked by the law and the prophets, Moses and Elijah; there by the two criminals.

Here light, dazzling from within and suffused from above in a bright cloud bathes the scene; then and there a deep darkness will come upon the land

Here Peter stutters how wonderful things are; then he will be cursing that he doesn’t know Jesus

Here the voice of God affirms what was said at Jesus’ baptism; then a pagan soldier will declare in surprise that surely this was God’s Son.

Our glorious humanity can only be revealed by way of Christ’s descent into the horror of the Cross; the strange “light” that will be the ultimate Epiphany, exposing our sin, and ultimately the repentance and forgiveness that will allow the world to journey into the knowledge of God.

The last Sunday of Epiphany then is a bridge onwards, an invitation to continue the journey.

Today’s Annual Vestry is also an opportunity to continue our journey together; to take the steps necessary to move into our own surprising future.

The promise of who we are and what we can be is before us; the path to get there is not always a straight one. What we’ve experienced together thus far is for the sake of what is to come.

I’m so encouraged by the folks God has gathered here; we’re a group that likes the comforts of the familiar as much as the next person (We/I say the same things as Peter from time to time!) but we’re also a group that understands we’re not there yet; that personally and communally we’re in the process of forming a community that is growing through risk-taking, through prayer, through learning what it means to listen to the voice of Christ and in that find that the glory is unveiled in our common journey.

And when we listen to *his* voice the penny may drop; it may yet astonish us to discover who that person beside us really is!