

Sense of the Sacred

In the Season after the Epiphany, the church explores signs of God's glory shining in the world. Mark describes Jesus' transfiguration and, with the disciples, we sense the sacred moment; we will see things in a new way from this time forward. We catch Elisha's vision of the sacred as Elijah is caught up to heaven. With Paul and the psalmist, we give thanks that God's light shines forth through us.

Focus Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

The Season after the Epiphany ends with the story of Jesus' transfiguration. This revealing of Jesus' glory is a turning point, marking the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the beginning of the journey towards Jerusalem and the fate that awaits Jesus there. Just before today's reading, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. But Peter does not understand Jesus' teaching about the kind of Messiah Jesus has come to be.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up on a mountain. While there, Jesus' appearance is transfigured – Jesus shines. The disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. This event has echoes of Hebrew Scriptures. Moses' face was transfigured on Mount Sinai when he was in God's presence and received the Law. Elijah also experienced God's presence on Sinai. Elijah's return will announce the coming of the Messiah. For Mark, Jesus fulfills the work of the Law and the prophets.

Jesus' shining garments mark him as one who has triumphed through martyrdom. Jesus' changed appearance – a "metamorphosis" – reflects his nature as both divine and human, and anticipates Jesus' changed appearance at the Resurrection.

Peter grasps a sense of the sacred, and wants to preserve it; he offers to build three tents. The word used for "tent" can mean "tabernacle," the same word used in John 1:14 to describe the incarnate Jesus "dwelling" among us. This word also connects with the Exodus story of the tent in the wilderness, and the Ark where God's glory dwells.

A cloud, a sign of God's presence, comes over the mountain. From it, a voice repeats the words from Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved." In Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, only Jesus hears the voice from

heaven. Here the disciples hear the voice telling them to listen to Jesus.

This time must have been a terrifying and amazing experience for the three disciples, but Jesus cautions them not to tell anyone about it. We have seen this before in Mark's gospel. It is not yet time for the disciples to proclaim the good news. The meaning of Jesus' messiahship is to remain a secret for the time being. As we move into the Season of Lent, we feel the tension building as Jesus' ministry continues.

It is in the seeing and understanding that God's messenger is known. In **2 Kings 2:1-12**, the prophet Elijah is carried up to heaven, and Elisha glimpses the sacred and comes to a fuller understanding of who Elijah is. Elisha receives a double portion of the spirit of Elijah, and is thus known as a prophet in the true succession.

The awe-inspiring image of God's majesty and our response to it are central in the other texts. In **Psalm 50:1-6**, God's majesty and power shine forth from Zion. God calls and judges, gathering the faithful. Paul, in **2 Corinthians 4:3-6**, speaks in images of light and darkness, of blindness and sight. Just as Moses veiled his face when it shone with reflected glory, so the gospel of Christ is veiled and hidden from those who do not believe. As we live in faith, God's love shines in our hearts. As did the disciples on the mountain, we see God's glory in Jesus the Christ.

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"Epiphany" means "showing forth." During this season, we have explored many ways in which God's glory is revealed in the life and work of Jesus and the disciples. Where and when have you sensed the sacred or caught glimpses of God's presence? How do such moments define your life as a disciple and a church?



February 22, 2009

Focus Scripture
Mark 9:2-9

Additional Scriptures
2 Kings 2:1-12
Psalm 50:1-6
2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Holy God, we see your glory in the face of Jesus the Christ. Grant that, as we look on Christ, we may be transformed and be strengthened to follow your call to serve in the world. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

The Focus for Ages 15–18

Young people often exhibit extremes in emotion – from the very high in joy, happiness, and excitement to the very low in sadness and depression. Some ministries have exploited these extreme emotions by providing experiences for young people that elicit emotional responses out of these extremes rather than the whole range of human emotion. This can be dangerous because it gives a false sense of reality. While “mountaintop” experiences happen every so often in life, the bulk of life is lived “on the plain,” a place that is often routine, even monotonous and boring at times. In a world where fame, money and power are highlighted, youth often feel the need to be successful and expect things to be great all the time. Today’s story reminds them that everyday life is just as important, and the moun-

taintop is an occasional gift to be treasured.

Young people are much more comfortable with mystery than most adults. Whereas the church, particularly mainline protestantism, has placed great emphasis on doctrinal precision and surety, postmodern people place more credibility in lived experience, which cannot be explained precisely and often includes elements of the mysterious. Young people tend to be comfortable with seemingly contradictory truths coexisting, often without reconciliation. They also tend to desire an experience of God in worship and daily life rather than intellectual platitudes about God. As a result, ritual that reaches beyond explanation and flirts with their experience and emotions is often very attractive. Pray that youth will be open to living into the mystery that a life in the Spirit offers.

February 22, 2009

PREPARE

Materials needed

Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, Mark 9:2–9, and biblical background material (p. 75). If possible, review article “Sacred Encounters” (p. 134) in the *Congregational Life* resource.
- ❑ If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access *Spirit Sightings* for connections between current events and the focus passage.
- ❑ Bring *Bibles, matches, offering basket, basic supply kit*, and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 7* and *CD player*.
- ❑ Prepare a worship space with *white fabric, large white candle*, and poster “Epiphany.”

Gather

- ❑ Bring song “Invocation” (p. 1 in *Music Section*, also #5 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of this week’s resource sheet “Transfiguration Choral Reading.”*

Respond

Choose one or more options. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Reflection:** *all posters for this season, copies of this week’s resource sheet “Transfiguration Reflection”*
- ❑ **Artistic expression:** *art and craft supplies, drawing paper*; if possible, obtain a recording of “Let the Mystery Be” (Iris DeMent, *Infamous Angel*, Warner Brothers, 1992); bring *song lyrics* from *Seasons* website (click on Links; Advent, Christmas, Epiphany 2008–09; February 22; Ages 15–18); check for performance regulations and guidelines for playing commercial CDs in your church building
- ❑ **Movie:** *copies of this week’s movie on resource sheet “Movies” (pp. 81–83)*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *poster “Great Mystery,” taper*, and *tealights*.
- ❑ Bring *song “Pulsing Spirit” (pp. 4–5 in Music Section, also #7 on Seasons Music CD)*.



Sense of the Sacred

Scripture

Mark 9:2–9

FOCUS To be open to living into mystery.

1 GATHER

Welcome the youth warmly and share some experiences of the past week. Point out the colour white used in the worship space to symbolize this special Sunday, Transfiguration Sunday, the last Sunday of this season.

Gather around the worship space. Invite a volunteer to light the candle. Place the poster *Epiphany* in beside the candle and invite youth to focus on their breathing, breathing in the word “mystery” and breathing out their cares and worries. Invite youth to use “mystery” as their holy word, as

they continue to look at the poster, to get lost in it, to see mystery in it.

Sing, listen to, or read the lyrics for verse 2 of “Invocation” (p. 1 in *Music Section*, and #5 on the *Seasons Music CD*).

Making connections

Invite youth to think about times of great mystery they have experienced. Distribute paper and art supplies and invite youth to create images in answer to the question: What does “mystery” feel, sound, look like?

2 ENGAGE

Setting the scene

Just before today’s reading, Jesus poses a question to his disciples concerning his identity – a question that Peter answers and then promptly misunderstands (**Mark 8:27–9:1**). The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus comes at the beginning of Jesus’ drive toward Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus invites his three most trusted disciples, Peter, John, and James, to share this experience with him.

Scripture reading

Distribute copies of the resource sheet “Transfiguration Choral Reading” and divide the parts and actions among the group. Invite youth to participate in the choral reading, based on **Mark 9:2–9**.

- **What insights into the biblical story were brought out by the choral reading?**
- **What questions do you have about this story?**

Invite youth to look at **Mark 9:4**. In this encounter Jesus speaks intimately with two of the greatest prophets of the faith, Moses and Elijah, key figures in the history of the Jewish people. Moses is the one who led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt and gave the people God’s law. Elijah was considered a great prophet, one who never died but was carried away into heaven. His reappearance, so the legend goes, anticipates the coming of the Messiah.

- **Given this background, what is the significance of Elijah’s presence?**
- **What does Moses’ presence say about Jesus’ ministry?**
- **What might be the reason for Peter wanting to make “dwellings” for Elijah, Moses, and Jesus?**

Invite youth to look again at verse 2. Explain that this story takes place six days after a conversation that Jesus had with the disciples, in which Peter correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah, but doesn’t really understand what Jesus’ mission is all about, and is unwilling to accept Jesus’ prediction about his future.

- **Why do you think Jesus tells the disciples to tell no one about the experience?**

In verse 7 we read of a voice from heaven speaking words that are reminiscent of another story. Invite youth to find the story of Jesus’ baptism (**Mark 1:4–11**) and notice the similarities and differences in the message.

- **In what ways do these words confirm Jesus’ mission and ministry?**

It is significant that the Season after the Epiphany begins and ends with these words, spoken at Jesus’ baptism and Jesus’ transfiguration.

DIGGING DEEPER offers older youth a chance to explore some themes in more depth.

- **If epiphany means manifestation or revelation, what is and has been revealed about Jesus?**

Digging deeper

The story of the transfiguration is shrouded in mystery. It is a story that casts a mysterious shadow around the person and work of Jesus.

- **How comfortable are you with mystery?**
- **Does God need to be explained in precise detail for you, or is it enough to know that mostly God cannot be known or explained? Share.**
- **If Jesus is the manifestation or revelation of God to the world, what do we learn about God by looking at Jesus?**

Connecting scripture with life

Although life is mostly lived in ordinary, everyday routines that can become monotonous or even boring, there are occasionally “mountaintop experiences,” times when we might feel God’s presence more deeply, when we sense the sacred. Read the quotation on the resource sheet “Transfiguration Reflection.”

- **Have you ever had a “mountaintop experience” emotionally or spiritually? What was it like? Did you want it to end? How did you try to prolong it?**
- **How can we remain open to the sense of the sacred in both ordinary times and special times?**

3 RESPOND

Choose one or more of the following options.

- **Poem prayers** This season begins and ends with the words “You are my Beloved.” Invite youth to create poem prayers, with this phrase as a repeating line, expressing ways they can open hearts and minds to listen in new ways to the mystery of God’s presence.
- **Reflection** During this season we consider how God’s light shines forth in our lives. Display the six posters and distribute copies of the resource sheet “Transfiguration Reflection.” Invite youth to spend a few moments examining each poster in silence and then respond to the questions.
- **Artistic expression** The mystery of God’s presence is sometimes hard to express in words. Invite youth to use art and craft materials to create an artistic impression of the concept of mystery. If possible, play the song “Let the Mystery Be” and invite youth to comment on how comfortable they are with mystery.
- **Movie** If you are able to have a “movie and snacks” evening at someone’s home this week, watch this week’s selection, outlined on the resource sheet “Movies” (pp. 81–83), and invite discussion of the questions.

4 BLESS

Gather around the lit candle. Invite youth to look at the poster *Great Mystery* as you read the lyrics for the song “Pulsing Spirit.” In what ways have they encountered God’s Spirit’s “unbounded motion”? What glimpses of God’s mystery and glory did they experience during today’s session?

Sing or listen to “Pulsing Spirit” (pp. 4–5 in *Music Section*, and #7 on the *Seasons Music CD*).

Close your session by inviting youth to take turns lighting tealights and placing them in a spiral pattern on the poster. Offer this closing prayer: “Up on the mountains, and down in our daily lives, help us to see your glory, O God. Help us to live in the mystery of your presence, opening ourselves to see your glory. Amen.” Invite the group to respond with “Amen,” and offer this blessing: “Know that you are God’s beloved. Go out in the shining mystery of this knowing.”

REFLECT

What insights did youth offer into the nature of mystery and living with mystery? As this is the final session for this season, reflect on the

time with youth and fill in the evaluation form found at the end of the resource package.



TRANSFIGURATION

Choral Reading

Narrator 1: Six days later...

Narrator 2: Jesus took with him Peter and James and John...

Narrator 3: and led them up a high mountain apart...

Narrators 1, 2 & 3: by themselves.

Sound effects: *wind blowing*

Narrator 1: And Jesus was transfigured before them.

Sound effects: *sounds made in sci-fi movies to designate a UFO or alien presence*

Narrator 2: with clothes that became dazzling white...

Narrator 2 & 3: such as no one on earth could bleach them.

Peter, James, and John express astonishment and fear.

Narrator 1: And there appeared to them Elijah...

Narrator 2: with Moses...

Narrator 3: who were talking with Jesus,

Elijah, Moses, and Jesus chat quietly among themselves.

Narrator 1: Then Peter said to Jesus...

Peter: Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

Narrator 2: Peter did not know what to say...

Narrator 1, 2, & 3: for they were terrified.

Peter, James, and John express terror.

Narrator 1: Then a cloud overshadowed them...

Sound effects: *creeping shadowy sounds*

Narrator 2: And from the cloud there came a voice...

Voice: This is my Child, the Beloved; to this one you shall listen!

Narrator 3: Suddenly, when they looked around...

Narrator 1: they saw no one with them anymore...

Narrator 2: but only Jesus

Peter, James, and John express astonishment.

Narrator 3: As they were coming down the mountain...

Narrator 1: Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen...

Narrators 1, 2, & 3 (in cascading voices): until after the Human One had risen from the dead.

Mark 9:2–9

Scripture reading taken from *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version*. Copyright © 1983 Oxford University Press, Inc. (an adaptation using the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America). Used by permission. All rights reserved.



Transfiguration Reflection

God is so close to us, around us, in us. The wind that caresses our face, the bird that sings, the mountain touching the heavens, an exquisite flower among the rocks, the immense sky, silence that trembles in its fullness, a smile, a look of love – all speak of the creator...”

Written by a Carthusian monk of the Abbey of Grand Chartreuse (From The Way of Silent Love: Carthusian Novice Conferences; translated by an Anglican solitary, p. 14)

Spend some time looking at each of the posters. Use the following questions to guide your reflection, writing some responses to each question within the picture frames.

- ◆ Where in each image do you see examples of God’s “epiphany” or “showing forth”?
 - ◆ Where do you see mystery and wonder in each image?
 - ◆ Where do you see hope and promise in each image?
 - ◆ How does each image speak of change and transformation?

