

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 12–14

Life can get very noisy at times. Radios, CDs, MP3 players, traffic, mobile phones, TV, Internet, computer gaming, advertising...are all contesting to gain our attention. It is easy for significant and important messages to get lost among the many distractions that assault our senses.

For many young people, the constant bombardment of images in this special effects-laden world robs them of any sense of awe and wonder. Young teens may have developed an "I've seen it all before" attitude when it comes to experiences that have the potential of being mystical. The enigmatic marvels of the Bible may have trouble competing with the celluloid miracles of Hollywood.

God may be speaking but the youth may not be able to hear because of all the interfering commotion.

This session will explore ways in which young adolescents can find a place where they can still find a sensation of reverence and sacredness. Perhaps in this location they will be able to find the clarity to hear God's voice. We will be looking at those "thin" places where the line between reality and the mystical become blurred perhaps giving the opportunity to experience a glimpse into God's way. Pray that from today's session the youth will discover their own sense of the sacred – a place where they feel comfortable to encounter the presence of God.

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 on page 75.
- ❑ If you have access to the Internet, visit www.spiritseasons.com and click on Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and focus passage. Bring information that might inform this week's session.
- ❑ Bring *white fabric* (for Transfiguration Sunday), *large white candle*, *basic supply kit*, and, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 7* and *CD player*.

Gather

- ❑ Bring *song "Pulsing Spirit"* (pp. 4–5, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Engage

- ❑ Bring *copies of this week's resource sheet "In a Sacred Place."*

Respond

Set up two or three of the following options in Response zones. Prepare and bring the materials.

- ❑ **Art engagement:** *copies of posters for Advent, Christmas, Epiphany 2008-2009, copies of "Art as a Thin Place" on this week's resource sheet "Faith Symbols"*
- ❑ **Create a faith symbol:** *copies of this week's resource sheet "Faith Symbols," various arts and crafts materials to create symbols*
- ❑ **Witness bracelets:** *assorted coloured beads, strips of leather or plastic cord*

Bless

- ❑ Bring *various equipment to play sounds* (such as radios, CD player)
- ❑ Bring *song "The Galilee Song"* (pp. 10–11, also #8 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Sense of the Sacred



Scripture

Mark 9:2-9

FOCUS To listen to God's voice in the wonder of sacred places.

GATHER

1

Welcome the youth to Transfiguration Sunday, explaining that it is the last week of the Season after the Epiphany.

Gather around the worship area. Receive the offering. Light the candle and explain that Transfiguration Sunday is recognition of the moment when Jesus' identity as the Son of God was confirmed to three of his disciples. The colour for this Sunday is white, symbolizing the way Jesus was seen in radiant glory.

Sing, listen to, or read "Pulsing Spirit" (pp. 4-5, also #7 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Pray this prayer or one of your own:

Gracious God, help us to listen for your voice so that we grow in understanding of your everlasting love. Amen.

Making connections

Recall with the youth a scene from the movie,

Forrest Gump. (It is not necessary to have seen the movie to initiate this discussion, if you use the description that follows.) Forrest is talking to his dear friend, Jennie. He tells her that wherever he is, she is always with him. And then he describes moments in his life – in Vietnam when the rain stopped and he looked up at the stars or when he ran a marathon and the sun came up over the desert, he didn't know where earth stopped and heaven began. Then ask the youth if they have ever had an experience like Forrest of reality meeting mystery, of a moment in time when earth and heaven seemed to meet. Examples might include being in nature, listening to their favourite music, or being absorbed in an interest or hobby they have. Invite them to think about these times. Then share that today's story explores a time when the disciples experienced a moment in time when the veil between reality and the mystical was lifted.

ENGAGE

2

Setting the scene

Jesus has been travelling with his disciples and followers, preaching and performing miracles. He has just told his disciples that his ministry and life will lead to suffering, death, but then resurrection. Ask youth to imagine they are Peter, James, or John, still trying to understand what Jesus has been saying, when Jesus comes up and invites them on a journey up a high mountain. In order to prepare for the story, distribute copies of resource sheet "In a Sacred Place" and review the background information about Moses and Elijah who also appear in this story.

Moving into the Story

Ask for four volunteers to take the roles of Peter, John, James, and God in the skit, "In a Sacred Place." After the skit, point out that this time with Jesus was to be a time apart from the crowds and the busyness of their everyday lives and ministry. Then ask:

■ **What is the result of Jesus leading the three to a place of quiet where they can wonder and reflect?**

The disciples saw Elijah and Moses with Jesus, two great prophets of God, two great leaders of the Hebrew people.

■ **What might Jesus being in the company of these two great people in Jewish history reveal about Jesus?**

■ **What might the disciples have thought after this experience?**

■ **What questions would you have liked to ask Jesus after this experience?**

Connecting the story with life

The disciples had a life-changing encounter on top of that mountain. Even though they had witnessed many miracles, this experience must have lifted them to another level of wonderment. Imagine encountering two historical icons of

the faith and then actually hearing the voice of God. We can imagine that the disciples' experience of a "sacred place" was one they looked back on often and would like to capture again. Some people call these sacred places where our wonderment is lifted to another level, "thin places." These are places of mystery where the space between heaven and earth seems very thin. Many people think these places are physical places where

creation is so beautiful one can't help but feel God's presence and magnificence. They can also appear when relating to others or to God in some significant way. Invite youth to reflect on the thin places in their own lives. Ask:

- **Where are the places or what are the times or things that renew your spirit?**
- **What changes might you need to make in you life so you can recognize and find those renewing "thin places?"**

3

RESPOND

Set up two or three of the following options as response zones where youth may experience or develop their own sacred place.

- **Art engagement** The transfiguration was a visual experience for Jesus and the disciples. Display all the posters from Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Invite the youth to choose one that conveys the idea of a "thin" or "sacred" place to them. (Some youth may choose the same image.) Distribute copies of "Art as a Thin Place" on the bottom of resource sheet "Faith Symbols" for youth to use to explore their chosen poster.
- **Create a faith symbol** Jesus and the disciples found a sacred place atop a mountain. But a sacred place might not be a physical place at all. It could be a state of mind where one can quietly meditate or pray. Some may find it helpful to have a symbol such as a cross, crown, or dove on which to focus as they pray. Distribute resource sheet "Faith symbols" or



look for symbols in your church that are meaningful to them. Using the materials provided, have them draw, sculpt or make a symbol that would act as a reminder of God's presence and guidance.

- **Witness bracelets** The disciples experienced a holy moment in time and were witnesses to Jesus' transfiguration. A witness bracelet can be a reminder to look and listen for those moments in our everyday lives. Provide coloured beads to thread on the leather or plastic cord. Each colour can represent a part of the story of Jesus and how he affects their lives. Youth can select colours that are meaningful to them, such as red for Jesus' love, blue for peace Jesus brings, green for growing faith. Tie a knot close to the beads on each end and then tie around wrist.

4

BLESS

Gather in the worship area. If possible, have variety of sounds playing (radios, CDs, television), competing with each other. Turn sounds off one by one until there is only silence. In the contrast, ask youth to imagine they are in their own "thin" place. If they made a symbol in Respond, they may wish to focus on it.

Sing, listen to, or read "The Galilee Song" (pp. 10-11, also #8 on *Seasons Music CD*).

Pray the following prayer or one of your own:

God of glory, with our hearts we pray to you and in the silence we listen for you.
Thank you for the gift of your own true son. Amen.

Sending out Close the session by encouraging youth to take time out during the days ahead and listen for what God might have to say.

REFLECT

In what ways did youth gain an understanding that God is not limited to a few sacred places but is alive and available to everyone in their own special way?



In a Sacred Place

(based on Mark 9:2-9)

Characters

John Peter James God

(James and John are walking very slowly. Behind them, clearly exhausted, is Peter)

Peter: Hey, James, John, wait up, will you?

James: Hurry up, Peter. Jesus is almost at the top of the mountain.

Peter: Yeah, well, good for him. I'm a fisher, not a mountain goat.

John: You are one of Jesus' disciples! And you're still angry because he rebuked you the other day.

Peter: Rebuked me! He called me "Satan." Me, one of his most loyal and trusted followers. Just because I had a go at him about him saying he had to suffer and die and all that. I mean it doesn't do a lot for team morale, does it?

James: That was six days ago. What I would like to know is why he asked only us three to climb this mountain with him.

Peter: Well at least it's quiet away from the others. They can be such a rabble at times.

John: *(looking ahead)* We are just about there. Look there's Jesus at the top.

(Peter runs past others.)

Peter: Hey Jesus we're here.... *(holds up hands to shield eyes)* Whoa, what's happening. What is this place? Jesus, is that you?

(Disciples look frightened.)

James: He so...so...bright! His clothes are dazzling white! And who's he talking with?

John: It looks like Elijah and Moses! But it can't be. I mean they've been gone for centuries!

James: *(scared)* What should we do? *(They all look at each confused)*

Peter: *(to Jesus)* Jesus, it's a privilege to be here. Let us put up some shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. *(shrugs to others)* Well, have you got any better ideas?

John: What's happening now? Where's this cloud coming from? Now I can't see a thing."

God: *(off stage)* This is my Child, whom I love. Listen to him.

James: Was that God? This is holy ground. Hey, the cloud's gone... and so have Elijah and Moses.

Peter: Better cancel those shelters then!

John: There's just Jesus. And now he's going back down the mountain. Come on.

(All turn and begin walking the way they came in.)

James: *(to John)* What did Jesus just say? I can't hear him with Peter puffing in my ear.

John: He said to promise not to tell anyone what happened until he is risen from the dead.

Peter: I'm not really sure what did happen up there except that God spoke to us and there is no question that Jesus really is the son of God.

Who was Moses?

Moses is one of the most important figures of the Hebrew Scriptures and is referred to often in the New Testament. He was a religious leader, prophet and lawgiver and plays a pivotal role in Jewish, Christian and Islamic faiths.

Moses was born in Egypt to Hebrew parents. At that time, the Hebrews were oppressed by the Egyptian Pharaoh and became slaves. Because their numbers were so great, the Pharaoh ordered all male Hebrew children to be drowned. Moses' mother set him adrift in the River Nile where he was found by the Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her own. When he was grown, he became angry at an Egyptian slave master who was abusing a Hebrew slave, and killed the Egyptian. He fled and became a shepherd. However, God appeared to Moses within a burning bush on Mount Horeb and told him to go back to Egypt to free the Hebrew people. Although Moses felt himself unsuitable, he did as requested and was successful in leading the Hebrew people out of Egypt to the land of Israel and freedom.

God spoke directly to Moses. Atop Mt Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. Other holy laws and practices also originate from Moses who was instructed in such things by God. Sadly, he was never to enter the Promised Land. Moses' appearance during the transfiguration is thought to represent the witness of the law to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.

Who was Elijah?

Elijah was a prophet in Israel and is believed to have lived four to five centuries after Moses. Like Moses, Elijah plays an important part in both the Jewish and Christian faiths. His story is mostly told in the Hebrew Scriptures but he is also referred to in the New Testament. Elijah was bold and straight to the point when dealing with others. God used Elijah to show that he was the one true God when the people of Israel began worshipping the false god, Baal. He had a defining experience on Mount Carmel when he had a showdown against the prophets of Baal. Elijah was triumphant, revealing the might and power of God to the people.

Elijah had another mountaintop experience when he encountered God on Mount Horeb, the same place where Moses first spoke to God. It was here he was told to anoint a successor, Elisha. He was walking with Elisha when a fiery chariot led by flaming horses separated them and a whirlwind whisked Elijah into heaven. Elijah is regarded as one of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. Both Jesus and John the Baptist were mistaken for Elijah returning, and it is thought that he will come again before the return of Jesus. Elijah's appearance during the transfiguration is thought to represent the witness of the prophets to the identity of Jesus as the Son of God.



Faith Symbols



Art as a Thin Place

Seeing/Observing

After you have selected the poster that conveys a sense of a “thin place” to you, look at it slowly, gently. Notice each part of the image and watch for anything that draws your attention. It may be just a certain shade. It may be a shape or line. It may be something of the story you imagine behind the picture. Don’t be discouraged if the first looking does not bring huge feelings of wonderment. This is an opportunity to simply be in the presence of the holy, to seek the holy in stillness. The invitation is to move ever more deeply into awareness of Spirit by remaining attentive and present to the image in front of you. There is no other agenda now than to simply see. When your mind wanders, gently bring your focus back to the image and your intention to see what is right in front of you. After a few minutes go to the next step.

Meditation

Take in the image even more deeply by tracing the lines/shapes/forms with your eyes (and your fingers, if possible). Try to memorize the image by looking intently and letting it sink into you. This may bring memories, thoughts, and feelings. Whatever you are feeling, or not feeling, is fine. There is no goal in this experience except to give your time and attention to the image and your response. Accept anything and everything that comes, even the apparent “negatives” of boredom, impatience, or judgment. As you become aware of your feelings, perhaps you will notice something in the image you didn’t see at first. Maybe you will find a connection between the image and something in your life. Perhaps you will feel yourself open up in some way. There is nothing right or wrong about your responses; they are simply examples of the range of experience you may have. After a few minutes go to the next step.

Prayer

Take time to offer to God what you have discovered in yourself through seeing and meditating. You can pray with words, movement, drawing, journaling. The choice is yours. When you are finished, go to the next step.

Contemplation

End this time by consciously resting in God’s loving presence. Sink into awareness and acceptance of whatever is happening in you and hold it all gently.

—adapted from www.spiritualityseries.com, *The Spirituality of Art*, Chapter One: Art as a Thin Place