
Our Epiphany Vision Quest

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C

Our theme for today is captured in the words of the sequence hymn we sang several minutes ago. Recalling just the last two verses, we sang:

The Spirit's power shakes the church of God . . .
Baptized, we live with God, the Three in One . . .
A new creation comes to life and grows,
as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood,
The universe, restored and whole, will sing: Alleluia!

“We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies No More;”
No. 296, The Hymnal 1982

In connection with that hymn, we also baptized new Christians today. The newly baptized were infants presented by their families. So, it's appropriate to think about young people; our youth who are on a journey or a quest, as we support their parents and their sponsors who are presenting their children to the Lord. I'll say more about that in a few minutes.

But the other focus for today is highlighted by the scriptures appointed for this Sunday: The Last Sunday after the Epiphany. We recall that our Epiphany scriptures began back in January, with the light of the Christmas star that led the magi to the Christ child: to the baby Jesus sheltered in the care of his parents.

Today's scriptures end the Epiphany season with Jesus transfigured in divine light while he was accompanied by his closest disciples. But then, there's one more scripture appointed for today, where all this Epiphany light comes home to us: to us, as we hear St. Paul describe our own transfiguration. That's right: here we get into the picture; we too get the equivalent of Jesus's transfiguration according to this verse from today's epistle reading: “And all of us,” the apostle writes:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3.18).

“This comes from the Lord, the Spirit,” says Paul. The Holy Spirit provides for all of us to experience a self-epiphany where we are being unveiled to ourselves—revealed to ourselves to be more and more Christ-like over time. How can we make this kind of transfiguration claim in ordinary terms? What kind of self-epiphany is Paul describing here, where we are becoming “unveiled” to ourselves as more and more Christ-like over time?

One of my favorite ways to talk about this kind of thing is in terms of science fiction. This is also where I focus on young people. One of my favorite sci-fi episodes is about the young Wesley Crusher in the Star Trek series called, The Next Generation. In his final series episode, Wesley is given the opportunity to experience a so-called ‘vision quest.’ It's presented as a Native American ritual and meditation practice. So, what we have here is a blending of science fiction and religion.

On the one hand the episode ends with Wesley becoming skilled in mastering the science of quantum physics. He gets apprenticed to a mentor who promises to teach him how to grow, like an avatar, ‘from one degree of mastery to another.’ On the other hand, that mastery begins with Wesley being invited by his mentor to ‘unveil’ himself as a “sacred person.” The word “sacred” is key in this episode, like the word “glory” in our epistle reading from Paul for today. Listen to the following conversation and notice how “sacred” is used to initiate

young Wesley into becoming 'unveiled' to himself and to his destiny as a practitioner of quantum physics. The conversation begins with his mentor asking him:

Mentor: What's sacred to you, Wesley?

Wesley: I don't know. I mean, I think a lot of things are important, I have a lot of respect for things. But I don't really consider anything sacred.

Mentor: Look around us. What do you think is sacred to us here?

Wesley: Maybe the necklace you're wearing? The designs on the walls?

Mentor: Everything is sacred to us. The buildings, the food, the sky, the dirt beneath your feet. And you. Whether you believe in your spirit or not, we believe in it. You are a sacred person here, Wesley.

Wesley: I think that's the first time anyone's used that particular word to describe me.

Mentor: So, if you are sacred, then you must treat yourself with respect. To do otherwise is to desecrate something that is holy.

Wesley: Is that what you think I've been doing?

Mentor: Only you can decide that.

Wesley: I guess I haven't had a lot of respect for myself lately.

Mentor: Then perhaps it's time for your own vision quest to begin.

[The Next Generation Transcripts - Journey's End \(chakoteya.net\)](http://chakoteya.net)

"Then perhaps it's time for your own vision quest to begin." That's how the exchange ends. And it's instructive for what we are doing here at the Cathedral today, as we baptize new Christians into the community of Jesus' disciples. Many of us here who have preceded these baptismal candidates have already embarked upon our own vision quests. We are the people of God who keep returning to church week after week, season after season, to unveil for ourselves what we are becoming; becoming as we grow more and more Christ-like; becoming under the influence of the Holy Spirit who meets us here in these liturgies, with the scriptures and with the sacraments of holy baptism and holy eucharist.

And so, church family, many of us can testify to this transfiguration as we come back to church again and again. And yes, the church strives to be faithful to each one of us: to foster the great unveiling of ourselves to ourselves—until we see for ourselves the person we fully are in God's sight. But the church is a community of fallible human beings. Of course, we do not perfectly sustain our mission to be 'all things to all people,' as Paul elsewhere describes his own ministry (1 Corinthians 9:22). In good conscience we would not hide that truth about ourselves, or 'practice cunning' to get people to believe that we are all that we aspire to be.

Nonetheless, as God gives us grace, we strive to be the place where families and individuals can continue to discover themselves as sacred persons. Yes, we're here to be unveiled to ourselves and to one another as persons created in the image of God; as a people destined by God to grow more and more into that reality over time.

And also, to paraphrase our opening prayer (Collect) appointed for today, we continue to need 'strengthening to bear our cross,' at the same time as we are discovering our God-likeness 'from glory to glory.' Indeed, for some of us, in the words of that story script quoted above, 'it may be time for your own vision quest to begin.'

In that connection, here today holy church provides our kind of vision quest in Holy Baptism. For baptized Christians who are continuing that quest you're invited to renew our baptismal vows. For those who are not baptized, or who are beginning your own vision quest, we invite you to seek—we commend to you! —the grace of this sacrament of Holy Baptism.

Finally, the goal we're after as we do all this is announced in the words of the sequence hymn that we sang several minutes ago; the words that I recalled as I began this sermon. We are doing what we do here today because:

The Spirit's power shakes the church of God

—because—
Baptized, we live with God, the Three in One . . .
And because—
A new creation comes to life and grows,
as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood
—so that—
The universe, restored and whole, will sing: Alleluia! *

Amen.

* "We Know that Christ is Raised and Dies No More;" No. 296, The Hymnal 1982

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