

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,
Oak Park, IL, by the Rev. Paris Coffey on March 6, 2011 (Year A),
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany: World Mission Sunday

And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here . . ." Matthew 17:2-4a

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany – designated by the Episcopal Church as World Mission Sunday. It's also the last Sunday before Lent, when we'll begin again – not with Jesus' birth, which some assume is the beginning – but with his ministry. Lent's journey starts with ministry, but today's reading – together with Jesus' Baptism – bookend the journey of Epiphany, the season of Light. You might think from today's readings that it's the Feast of the Transfiguration we're celebrating, but it's not. That's in August. Rather today is World Mission Sunday, and the Last – or some might say "**FINAL**" – Sunday after the Epiphany, which comes later than usual. In fact, this year it seems like it must be at *least* the 32nd Sunday of Epiphany, having sung every Epiphany hymn ever written. Finally, though, the light is about to end and the dark days of Lent to begin.

I once had an organist who on this day would play only hymns with "Alleluia," bracing for an alleluia-less Lent. You might say that, "it's light's last fling," with the obvious exception, of course, of pancakes on Fat Tuesday. That's certainly a festival event, as is today where we hear one of the Gospel's strangest but most striking stories of the divinity of Jesus. "His face shone like the sun," writes Matthew, reminding us at the end of Epiphany/on World Mission Sunday that **WE** are called to shine like the Son of God in the world. As we prayed at the start of worship, "Grant to us, O God, that **WE**, beholding by faith the light of Christ's countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and changed into his likeness from glory to glory. Amen." We are called to be light-bearers, and so the theme chosen for today – for this year's World Mission Sunday – is "Lord, it is good for us to be here."

These are Peter's words – stumbling words, yes, accompanied by a misguided need to do something/to memorialize the moment and make it manageable in the face of Jesus' glory. They are *also*, though, important words, since stumbling or not, we are all that Jesus has – the best that God can do, you might say. **WE** are the hands and feet of God, which the Rev. Dr. Sandra McCann, an Episcopal missionary in Tanzania, suggests when she says that people who find out that she's a missionary, conclude that she *must* be a saint. "I smile and assure them I am," she says, "but in the next breath I assure them that by virtue of their baptism, so are they. (In fact) if I can do one thing . . .," McCann continues, "I would like to dispel the myth that the work of missionaries (who) serve in a global context is any more important or noble than any other Christian's mission. If it were not for the faithful service of the people in the churches at home, I would not be serving in Tanzania."¹

After all, we are ALL called to mission, an identity that World Mission Sunday seeks to reawaken. It seeks to reaffirm our church's roots, which call us beyond ourselves as evidenced in our church's official, *legal* title: "The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church USA." This title may surprise you, since people are often surprised that the Episcopal Church even *has* missionaries. McCann says she didn't know it until seminary, which is one reason that she's quick to point out *now* that at present there are 62 Episcopal missionaries in 25

¹ All of the insights, quotes, and stories of The Rev. Dr. Sandra McCann, are offered in her sermon for World Mission Sunday 2011 through the Episcopal Church's website at <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons>.

countries around the world. Fourteen are in the Young Adult Service Corp – a one-year program for those between the ages of 21 and 30 – while the remaining 48 serve as appointed missionaries or volunteers. Many are supported with stipends and prayers by the Mission Personnel Office of the Episcopal Church in collaboration with dioceses committed to this work.

This includes the Diocese of Chicago, which encourages relationships with our companion dioceses of Southeast Mexico and Renk in Sudan. McCann is also eager to point out, though, that today's model of overseas mission work is **NOT** what it was under colonialism when missionaries were sent out in part to dispense a more “civilized” culture or hold up a set of rigid religious hoops to jump through. To be an Episcopal missionary *today* is to be a partner in mission, sent only at the invitation of a diocesan bishop in another country. Such a bishop contacts the Episcopal Church's national mission office, requesting someone with particular skills in a particular arena. “We go,” says McCann, “to be in personal relationships, using our gifts – and often modifying them – to meet the needs of those whom we are serving. We go to enlarge our understanding of the gospel by seeing how God is being revealed in other places and people.”

What's more, McCann emphasizes that this outward journey first requires an inward one. “While I, and probably many of you,” she says, “would like to have had a mountaintop experience like Moses and the disciples, I have not. God did not reveal (God's) self to me in any blaze of glory. My encounter with God was through the faithful work of the church at home – in Bible study, prayer groups, preaching, in the sacraments, and in the lives of the disenfranchised whom my church embraced.” And this is probably a good thing, since mountain-top experiences often make us want to STAY on top of the mountain. Certainly the first reaction of Peter, James, and John – Jesus' closest friends – was to stay put. “Jesus, it's a good thing we're here,” says Peter. “Let's build some dwellings —some memorials, booths, tents, whatever you want to call them – and let's just stay here!”

That pretty much gives Peter's agenda away. He didn't want to let go. Without doubt, it was good that they were there – Peter, James, and John – or we never would have heard the story. Of course, we never would have heard it either if they had simply stayed, soaking up their moment on the mountain until the cows came home. Granted, they needed to be quiet; they needed to listen. But eventually they had to leave, which as you know – if you've ever glimpsed such a moment yourself – can be hard. At least it was hard for me when I glimpsed Christ's light in my mother's eyes – whose face shone like the sun – some months before her death. Some of you may remember that time – just before Christmas 2007 – when I was in Virginia with my daughter Sarah. My mother had fallen and was awaiting surgery, but had to be stabilized first. They weren't sure that she'd survive it, and so I brought a little Christmas tree to her room, thinking that this might be her last.

The room was dark, other than the lights of the little tree, but she looked at me with light in her eyes. She smiled, and for longest time, she held my hand. We both felt close to God, and I didn't want to leave. In fact, even after her surgery, which went as well as could be expected, I wanted to stay. Christmas at St. Christopher's, though, was fast approaching and God said, “It is time. You can't stay here forever!” It's not what *most* people would even call a mountaintop experience, and yet writer Frederick Buechner says that that's exactly what such moments are – moments when holiness shines through humanness. “The face of a man walking his child in the park,” writes Buechner, “of a woman picking peas in the garden, of sometimes even the unlikeliest person listening to a concert, say, or standing barefoot in the sand watching the waves roll in . . . Every

once and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing."¹

That's what happened to me, and obviously to Buechner. It's what happened to missionary Sandra McCann, who despite the fact that she says she never had a mountaintop experience, admits that her "inward spiritual journey fueled her outward one." It's likely what happened to Peter, James, and John; and what will hopefully happen to you on what seems to be the 32nd Sunday after the Epiphany –with a little nudge out of the clouds from God afterwards – for without it, we will never make it down the mountain. We'll never make it out the door to love and serve and the Lord, much less into mission fields – *wherever* those might be. ***Amen.***

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life*, "Transfiguration," (Harper Collins: San Francisco, 1992), p. 204.