



**St. Andrew's By-the-Sea** **THE FIFTH SUNDAY**  
*The Episcopal Church* **AFTER EPIPHANY**  
*in Destin, Florida* **February 19, 2023**

**A homily by the Reverend James J. Popham**

Some time ago we were flying – traveling by air, not actually flying, though that would fit the storyline better – we were traveling by air on a Southwest 737, probably an older 737-100, because it still had a few seats arranged in groups of four, two-by-two facing each other. It did not offer much legroom, but it occasionally would allow some fascinating conversations to develop. On this particular flight we sat across from a gentleman from Jerusalem. In fact, he had been born in Jerusalem, as had his father and his grandfather. He was Jewish. Mind you this, if I recall correctly was a flight from Jackson, Mississippi, to Baltimore, Maryland – not a flight from Paris to Tel Aviv.

I have never forgotten – obviously – one thing that he said. We were discussing the then – and ever-present – state of conflict in the Middle East, wherein he observed that in order to get the attention of the “other side,” the Arabs, the Palestinians, whoever, you had to do something overwhelming and outrageous, something dramatic and shocking. This conversation came to mind several years later when we pummeled Bagdad with cruise missiles and laser guided bombs, that unforgettable night of shock and awe. That was designed to get their attention – and, presumably, it did. Neither the Middle East nor the world has been the same ever since. Though, admittedly, peace in the Middle East remains as elusive as ever.

Today we recall again the Transfiguration. And it hardly is a stretch to say that for Peter, James, and John, it was a moment when God visited on them a moment that was “overwhelming and outrageous, something dramatic and shocking.” And they were terrified. Indeed, according to the Gospel this morning, “they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.”

Imagine God enveloping us in a cloud and telling us Jesus is his son and we better listen to him. That would be awesome, but maybe not as shocking as we might think. Though we might ask ourselves how terrified we might be. But God never has been particularly subtle in getting across who Jesus is and what Jesus means for us. Consider what we will say in Eucharistic Prayer C this morning:

We celebrate his death and resurrection, as we await the day of his coming.

And upon reflection, after the crucifixion – and resurrection –, Peter would write:

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the son of God, the savior and redeemer of the world has not only died, but was executed like the most heinous criminal.

We might gloss over how shocking that was to his disciples because we know the rest of the story. We know today that it was to turn the world upside down, but for them, it was the end of the world. All their hopes and dreams of escaping Roman oppression and restoring Israel to its glory perished just as surely as did Jesus’ earthly life. And Jesus’ disciples were shocked and terrified.

But three days later, as we acknowledge and celebrate every Sunday, Christ was raised from the dead. He is risen, indeed. Talk about “overwhelming and outrageous, something dramatic and shocking.” The empty tomb and the bodily presence of Jesus among his disciples evidenced something unprecedented in human history. Many still find it a “cleverly devised myth” as the author of today’s second reading might say. But even now some two thousand years later 2.2 billion people around the world call themselves followers of the risen Christ.

And, finally, we live in the promise and hope that Christ will come again. Can we have any doubt that that moment in the history of the world will be just as dramatic and overwhelming ... and undoubtedly shocking to many.

Might we conclude then that God is not above the dramatic, even the theatrical in trying to get our attention. Which brings back around to the Transfiguration. Can we almost hear Jesus praying, “I know my disciples are a little dense and still do not really understand who I am and what I really am about, but could you spare the theatrics. They will be so frightened and

incredulous they will be too scared to mention their experience on the mountain to anyone else.” Yet God is undeterred. In one of the most powerful and visually stunning scenes in Biblical lore, God calls Jesus his son...and says, “Listen to him.”

Are we missing that in today’s earthly culture? How convenient – in some ways – would it be if God did something dramatic, something shocking and awesome to get our attention again? Would we be impressed, even shocked and awestruck? Would we gloat over our atheist brothers and sisters? Would we be exchanging high-fives with other followers of Christ? Or would we even notice?

Now one major clarification is in order. By something dramatic, shocking, or awesome, we do not mean something destructive, like a hurricane or an earthquake. When we served as chaplains at the Austin Convention Center, which housed 5,000 refugees from New Orleans after Katrina, we were shocked and dismayed that some of our fellow chaplains, not Episcopalians, were preaching that Katrina was God’s revenge on New Orleans – for reasons that honestly are not that hard to imagine. Still, we might remember that a hurricane destroyed our roof here at St. Andrew’s, and finding a comparison between St. Andrew’s and New Orleans would be something of a stretch. We would much rather treat the rescue of people after nine and 10 days trapped in the rubble of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria as a shocking and awesome sign that God is very real and very loving.

In any event, have we noticed...really noticed how God already has subjected us to shock and awe? We say we do:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

Do we really need more evidence of the reality of God and divinity of Christ? Do we really need God to entertain us with some new spectacular and stirring event just to get our attention?

Maybe we just need to brush aside the inevitable distractions of life and surrender the idols that we hold so dear? Maybe we should find God in the little things, the little events, the occasional act of grace or kindness that spin our heads around because we seem to encounter so little authentic goodness in the world. Because all genuine and authentic goodness and grace come from God. And when we see it, we see no less clearly than Peter, James, and John on the mountain that God is real, that Jesus is divine, and that we are called to follow, to live our lives as the followers of Christ we claim to be.

Because God is awesome. Jesus, the Christ, will come again. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. And one way or the other, that would be us.