Last Sunday after the Epiphany All Saints’ Church

February 11, 2018 Year B

2 Kings 2:1-12 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Psalm 50:1-6 Mark 9:2-9

This week my daughter called me saying, “I need you to make me feel better about something I did.”

I love instructions like this- so clear: she’s giving me permission to be a care-taker.

“I gave money away today to a man on the street. He came up to me, with a very common New York story….. from San Francisco, stranded, lost his wallet, his phone stolen, hungry, and needed just some help to get by until his friend could arrive (yada yada yada)…… so I did this stupid thing and gave him money…. So stupid; I know it was just a scam; he’s probably treating himself to drugs as we speak… urgh…”

“Honey, you have no idea. Something stirred inside of you. Maybe he’s telling the truth, or maybe, even if he’s buying drugs, your gracious gift may move him, may change him, may get him to be thinking about his life in new ways.”

“I gave him $20. I don’t have $20 to give away.”

“Right, so your heart gave it to him. You saw something in him that needed that $20 more than you needed it. And you responded to his desperation. He wasn’t invisible anymore. You were not accepting the dominating narrative about those unhoused. Or maybe, in the midst of your own frustrations and feeling “stranded and lost” as you wait for job offers or acceptances into grad school, you needed to give some money away just to know that you are not as vulnerable as you feel. Maybe it was a gift to yourself…. No matter what, you had a glimpse of the holy, an act that happened beyond yourself, beyond the “evidence”. Believe in its grace.”

“Thanks Mom, I feel better.”

This morning we are treated to a story referred to as the Transfiguration. We tell this story multiple times throughout the church year. It’s enigmatic, mysterious with dazzling light, clouds and rumors of voices. Is it a miracle, a parable, a vision or some mysterious combination of all three? We don’t know.

Yet, there may be no other passage so brimming with meaning, so full of images to stimulate our imagination through so many senses of sight, touch and hearing, to wonder how we would have acted, and to ponder about its meaning for us as Christians.

First of all, there is a mountain, reminiscent of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on a mountain. We have lots of stories of mountains on Mt. Sinai, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Zion, Mt. Harmon, the Sermon on the Mount, all mountaintop experiences of God’s glory.

Then there is a cloud, just like the cloud that led Israel out of Egypt- to the Promised Land, the sacred journey of a lifetime that liberated a people from slavery into freedom.

And then besides Moses, the Giver of the Law, there’s Elijah, who is the prophet, who, when he returns, will signify the end of the Age… Apocalypse now. And then there is Jesus who is transfigured into glorious Light which blinds, and a Voice from the Heavens saying “This is My Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” These few verses pack together a repetition of some of the most powerful images that we find in our biblical stories.

And then it ends with the disciples wanting to “capture” it all in a moment and hold onto the glory forever, which can never happen, and Jesus descending down, into the very mess of our lives to save us.

No wonder we tell this story a lot. Our forbearers, mothers and fathers of the faith, believe that when you told stories of faith, something greater happened then the simple recall of the past.

We believe this, too. We say things like, “Christ is in our midst, when two or three of us gather,” or “Christ is always near you, on your lips, and in your heart,” which is what I was trying to tell my daughter. And we believe that Eucharist is not just in memory of the Last Supper, but that God is with us in the simple gifts of bread and wine. Jesus’ Real Presence is here!!

When we tell our stories of faith, the power of the event that initiated the belief is released again. The past is the present and the future. We are never alone. What I love about this story is that Jesus steps out of his dazzling glory of Light, takes our hands, and walks down the mountain. And just like the disciples, even in the midst of all our weaknesses, fears and doubts, we accept Jesus’ invitation to walk with him. Some days are better than others, but this is our story.

As many of you know, I have just returned from the memorial service in which we buried and celebrated the life of my dear friend, colleague and priest, Anne Richards. Thank you for all your prayers, notes, texts, emails, whispers, hugs, letting me know that you have me in your heart.

What is also difficult about this past funeral is that this is the same weekend that my mother died and we buried my youngest cousin, eight years ago….. but as we all know tragedies and sorrow can transcend time and feel as real today as when the event actual happened.

I called Marni, the wife of my cousin, to just check in. My cousin was killed in a helicopter accident when on a mission tracking wildlife for the Fish and Game in the mountain range of the Sierra Nevada. The helicopter hit an unmarked wire and all three biologists and pilot on board were killed instantly.

I wanted to hear the story again of how she stood up to the big corporations who were trying to intimidate the wives from suing.

A year after the death, I flew out to CA to be with Marni and we went out to the ravine, to the crash site. The wire had been replaced but was still unmarked. I asked about it, and Marni said, “Oh if it’s marked, then they are admitting that it should have been marked in the first place. This is what gives me the strength to sue. After the court case, they will mark it.”

One of the ways the corporations were shifting blame was to present evidence that the pilot was high so that the insurance company would be responsible for the “wrongful death” and the case it would be resolved quickly, not with much money, but over… The presentation of the evidence was dividing the wives. The corporations sequestered the women, separated them in different rooms, gave them their “proof,” and hoped it would do its trick.

Marni was alone, embracing at first the idea of finding a real person to blame, a fast conclusion, and the capacity to put it all behind her. But then something overtook her… let’s say dazzling light and clouds and a voice.

She got up, found the room where the pilot’s wife was segregated, and said, “Arlene, I am Marni Cotter, my husband was one of the biologists on that fated flight.”

Arlene shrunk away, afraid.

Marni said, “I am here to connect with you, to say I’m sorry, to help us, to bond, and not be separated by fear and corporate greed. We all loss so much. If your husband was high, which I doubt, this “evidence” is inconclusive. And if that’s the case, then my husband got into a helicopter knowing his pilot was inebriated. I can’t believe that, but if he did, he made the mistake of his life.

“I don’t know what happened; none of us do, but I do know this. The last thing I am going to do is stain my love for my husband by villainizing someone else. We’re in this together.” Marni did not let this woman become invisible.

Arlene broke down, the women hugged and they convinced the other two wives to fight for justice, and to not be afraid.

I like to ask Marni what gave her the strength, and she often says, “I don’t know, but in all that tragedy, corruption and pain, I heard a voice- my voice, connected to my integrity. I had a glimpse of the holy. “ I like to say that her lips confessed what her heart believed.”

So true. What does our heart believe? We are saved by the hand of the one who always prays for us through the night, who crosses abysses, who walks down mountains into the frey, who holds us just as we are sinking, and says, “Fear not, I am with you.”

We tell stories so that the power of the event which initiated belief is released again. We believe in the Real Presence of Jesus…. We call that the Christ.

William Faulkner in his novel *Light in August* writes, “Memories believe before knowledge remembers.” Our stories of faith ordain us with dazzling light, and remind us that we are never alone, and we are blessed with glimpses of the holy.

Lent is soon beginning- a time to be more intentional about our practice of faith. Jesus says, “Come to me.” And we, sometimes afraid and of little faith, hold out our hand and Jesus takes it and walks with us through our blessings and our travails, and through it all, we are in the cloud of mountain glory. AMEN