

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Last Sunday of Epiphany: February 14, 2021

“Love Story”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Morning and Happy Valentine’s Day. So, “Where do I begin, to tell the story of how great a love can be?” I think, I can begin with today’s Gospel, the Transfiguration.

I had the honor this year to be part of the review committee for a dissertation by A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Bishop Dea De Witt. His work is entitled “Dying with Quiet Eyes,” which is a study of Near-Death Awareness. He writes extensively about the Transfiguration as an event experienced by almost every human being prior to death, and reveals that the human markers of birth and death were experienced by Jesus as being very similar to us, yet in a more divine way.

Bishop De Witt, like myself is a hospice chaplain, but only after having experienced his first death with a family member during his seminary years. Just like every other family that has a seminary student, he was asked to officiate and speak at a service. He describes the moment when he went to begin his sermon stating, “I could *see* him in a flash of my “third eye.” It was Grandpa Chuck, hovering over and behind me, looking down on me as I had been writing. I felt a sense of approval and a deep, abiding, unconditional love. I knew then that everything was always going to be okay in my life.”

De Witt informs us that this is an African American cultural-spiritual phenomenon families sometimes have with recently-deceased loved ones. “Our dead will “pass

over” us before they go on to heaven. It is a way for them to confirm continuity of their existence from beyond the grave, and prompts the process of good grieving for those who are left behind.”

I bring this forward because as we read the story of Elijah, we must realize that this phenomenon is not just some distant fairytale contained in the Old Testament. It is also not only culturally contained within the Jewish tradition, but rather a more universal human experience.

Near-Death Awareness (NDA) can be defined as when a person (who may or may not be a hospital patient) has a spiritual visitation or other numinous experience of a previously-deceased loved one, typically when that person is entering the time of physical decline toward their own death. This then prepares the person getting ready to die, but also informs those around them that the time is near and that their future words and deeds are really important right now.

Several years later De Witt was called home as his father was dying and shares that when he walked into the room, he was taken aback as he noticed his father’s face glowing. He tells us his father began speaking about Jesus and the Buddha which De Witt admits was a little strange for their very Christian black family. His father then shared that grandma had come to see him and that everything would be alright. His father then avoided talking about the visitation from grandma, but never the less, was very different after that day. De Witt’s father became focused on getting his legacy straightened out and there was no more anxiety, sleepless nights, or stress about his physical decline and up-coming death.

It seems to me, our scripture today is a mirror to these stories. After many years of hospice, I have experienced similar stories. There are always the same components.

Whether it is years, months, weeks, days, or hours, most people have a sense of what is to come and experience an NDA, or near-death awareness.

Now Jesus is transfigured in front of the disciples when the prophets appear. Elijah and Moses (who would be considered Jesus' closest allies, despite being dead for many centuries,) appear to tell him that he is headed to the end of his life. But also to some degree, including an epiphany for the disciples present, they represent the information that all will be OK, that this is just another piece in the process of life. God is large and in charge.

The disciples, of course like other family relatives or caregivers tending to those close to death, have no reference on how to react. And due to honoring the command not to share the story – maybe for fear they would be considered crazy - the disciples find themselves entering the next part of their lives with an insight others don't have. Yet we know that they quickly forget or lack the understanding of what they have witnessed.

God clearly identifies that Jesus is God's son and the Beloved One, and from this moment on Jesus will try to teach the disciples that he will be nearing his death even though they never quite understand. This is the moment, "God gave his only begotten son." This is the last Epiphany. This is where the greatest love story begins. Not only a love between Father and Son, but an inclusive love and sacrifice for all of humanity. For as strange as the scriptures of Elijah and the Transfiguration are, they are not so distant from ourselves. Long before Jesus gives up his Spirit on the cross, long before the Holy Spirit appears on the scene, God shows us the eternal soul we all possess, and His care in receiving it into another realm.

This may not be the funny little valentine that you were expecting today. And this may not be an appropriate story for very young people whose focus is on romance today. But for those who are a little longer in the tooth, or have lost someone they truly love, this can be the most reassuring love letter from God they can receive.

For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son. Not on a whim, not just in passing, and not in a way so different from our own. He also did not let Jesus enter this part of his life unprepared. For Bishop De Witt, his grandfather's coming to help him with a sermon, his father's glowing face and strength to face his own death, were life changing.

To Jesus and the disciples, the same applies. For as much as Jesus is Divine, he too was human. God did not make this decision lightly, I am sure. It was planned way before the Jewish political scene became what it was at the time of the crucifixion. But none the less, it was a presentation of love and reassurance. It was a way to allow those with faith to die with quiet eyes. A way to be reassured God is with us even through our very last moments and that no one we love is ever lost.

For those celebrating Valentine's Day today with those they love, remember how much God loves you and how you are truly blessed to have those loved ones with you. For those celebrating today with an empty chair at their dinner table, remember that those you miss are only a breath away, and they too, at the end of their earthly life, were not alone.

There it is, the Last Epiphany, and the Greatest love story every told. Amen.