

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut
on February 11, 2018, The Last Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

Those of you over a certain age will remember that people couldn't always pick up the phone and dial a few codes to have global access. Phoning someone in Texas or London was referred to as long distance back then and it was only done for good reason. If it was important to speak to someone specific at the number, you called the operator and asked her (it was always a her) to make the call person-to-person. And though person-to-person calls cost more than station-to-station calls, you didn't have to pay unless you reached the one you were calling.

God seems to have a habit of calling person-to-person too. God communicates with us through people, and that seems quite remarkable to me, considering people's ability to botch things up and get things wrong. But that's the way God does things. Oh, God has used station-to-station means of communication from time to time. Remember that God wrote the commandments on tablets so they couldn't get lost or forgotten, but God didn't carve them permanently on the side of a mountain. Instead God gave the tablets to people who managed not only to break the commandments but to break the tablets too. But they never forgot God's Law. They told the words person-to-person from one generation to another, adapting and remembering and recalling the Law and making it their own.

God's choice of person-to-person communication may be because God is three persons in one, a holy Trinity. God's person-to-person approach may be because God is Love, and love can't exist without lovers. But no matter the reason, God has chosen to teach us and heal us and lead us and strengthen us person-to-person. You see it happen in this morning's Gospel when Jesus was transfigured and authenticated as God's Son. Jesus shone with glory, and it was a grand sound and light show, apparently, but look where it happened – on a mountaintop with only three spectators. When God proclaims of Jesus, "This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him;" God speaks to three disciples only. The transfiguration could at least have happened in the Jerusalem temple where thousands could have seen and heard it, but no, God seems to prefer working person-to-person.

God seems to want to be made known through you and me too. And so acolytes and choristers and ushers and lay readers and the Altar Guild come here on Sunday mornings to prepare a place for us to be fed and to hear the Good News so that we can tell Good News. Our Christian Education team has come to teach the stories of our faith to our children and someone is here to offer healing prayers. A fireman named Walter McKinney is here because he was called by God to be a deacon as well as a fireman, and a lawyer named Susan Pinkerton is here, called by God to use her skills to proclaim God's law and God's justice here. And I am called and Bill Eakins is called and you are called to make God known in this world.

Like the three disciples Jesus took with him to the mountaintop, each of us will sometimes be rash and impulsive like Peter and, like James, bluster about so much that he was called a Son of Thunder. But no matter what, God counts on each of us to speak, like John, of the Word made flesh who teaches and heals and blesses us. We are each called to give each other glimpses of the mountaintop moments when time seems to stop and God is there with us. We are each called to tell God's story through our own eyes, and our stories will be different stories because we are different people.

Here is why this is so. Let's start with the basic premise that God wants to be known, that God is not content to sit in heaven without a world and so God said, "Let there be light" or something like that and light and dark and sea and dry land and birds and bees came forth – and then a man and a woman whom God called by name and breathed into life. They were created – and we are created – to love God, and since we can't love Someone unless we know them, God has gone to extraordinary lengths to give us glimpses of Divine love and power and compassion. God wants to be known, but, you see, God can't just come to our doors like a friendly neighbor

because we couldn't take it. As the Psalm says, "Before him there is a consuming flame, and round about him a raging storm." And as God told Moses, "You cannot look on my face and live."

From time eternal, God has been about the work of self-revelation, sending angels ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder, inspiring prophets and priests to tell the story, but God's people, being people, didn't always listen, and so in the fullness of time God sent Jesus to come among us teach us and heal us and bring us hope.

But people, being people, were frightened of the power of Love to change the world, because it was their world that would have to change, and so they nailed Jesus to a cross. Now who would be left to tell God's story? Only a few disciples, but even these few, speaking person-to-person, would change the world. Jesus was transfigured to strengthen those disciples for what lay ahead, so that even the crucifixion could not erode their faith. Jesus led Peter and James and John to the top of the world where they were shown almost more glory than they could stand before they went back down into the trenches. They were given a glimpse of heaven to anchor them during the dark days ahead. For how is it possible for anyone to endure the valleys if they have never been to the mountaintop?

God takes us to the mountaintop too. We see glimpses of God's love when we see parents bending over their sick child, night after night, praying for healing, praying for hope. We see glimpses of God's strength when a colleague allows us to be who we are, human and vulnerable, and offers help instead of condemnation. We see glimpses of God's comfort when we are grieving and heavy-laden and arms reach out to enfold us. We see glimpses of transfiguration when people light up – and people do light up, you know, people on fire with passion to bring Christ's justice to this world; they get, well they get transfigured. We see God's glory when bread is broken and wine poured out and shared person-to-person so that we might be filled with the body and blood of Christ as we carry the crosses of this world.

In a few minutes the children will hide the Alleluia banner for Lent. The season of Lent begins this Wednesday, forty days of walking the way of the cross, strengthened by the faith and hope and love we have known and by the glimpse of God we have seen. For some the season of Lent will not matter; for others it will be our own Olympiad, a time to discipline ourselves like athletes. Athletes practice to build up their muscles; Christians pray to build up their souls. Christians give up things to learn that God is more important than chocolate, and they keep at it for forty days because being faithful to small commitments teaches us to be faithful to larger ones. It really doesn't matter what we do for Lent as long as we do something. You could turn off the television and listen for God in the silence. You could put a quarter in a mite box every day. The \$10 won't make a dent in the world's poverty but it can make an impression on our souls if we make a serious ritual of it. You could join the Good Book Club (see today's bulletin!) and read God's story every day.

We need to know God's story because we are the ones that God is counting on to live the story person-to-person, to tell Maxom and Harper, the little ones baptized here last month, that Jesus loves them, to show those who are preparing for Confirmation that this community will support them and show them what it looks like to live as faithful Christians.

Person-to-person is the way God works. And since we are made in God's image, this is the way we are to work too. So go into the world today, transfigured as a reflection of God's glory, shining as God's beloved children, caring for each other as God cares for you, person-to-person.