Sermon on the Last Sunday of Epiphany
(Luke 9:28-43)

I have a real bias when it comes to the Bible; every single text, every reading from our lectionary must have a contemporary significance, a present-tense “now.”

Already I’ve made a couple of you nervous and I’ve uttered one sentence! If you’re an historian or if you’re a student of EFM you know that the key to correctly understanding an historical text, an ancient text, a biblical text is to properly locate it on the map of history, so that the language games, the prevailing thought at that time can help us understand what it meant for the first readers. Without that we’re just makin’ stuff up; my scholar sons use a different word than stuff!

We all know Christians who believe that the biblical texts have a “now feel” to them. Many fundamentalists misappropriate the book of Revelation as an end-of-the-world prediction; which has—just to show you that theology and biblical interpretation is very serious business—many of the Christians in the most economically and militarily powerful nation on earth not caring if the climate gets hot as hell; if a corrupt President routinely tramples on the rights of minorities and immigrants.

I’ve had people like that say to me; “I don’t care, it’s all going to burn.”

It means that many Christians read certain admonitions of Paul as applying to our time and place without qualification and so dooming certain people to a life without love just by virtue of their biology!

Even with that I want to double down on my claim, every story, however odd, however bizarre sounding, however, seemingly, *unlike* our “now,” unlike our time and place contains great significance and wisdom for our lives.

And I think we can claim that precisely if we believe history matters, precisely if we believe that when, just to throw out the two examples I’ve already touched on, the Book of Revelation is a book originally written for the sake of Christians living under the Roman emperor Domitian in approximately 95 CE

 Or that Paul wasn’t just trying to be nasty to homosexuals per sae, but admonishing newly converted Roman men to change their sexual habits, many of whom were heterosexuals but regularly had sex with male minors or slaves as a badge of social status.

Being aware of historical context protects us from misusing these stories and thus abusing others; it protects us, in other words from a false understanding of how it is significant now but it doesn’t yet get us to that “real now.”

It’s like these stories are trees, trees that first put down roots in the past, but then grow into their full potential, the branches reaching into every present, into every “now,” so that as we start to read, start to engage with them spiritually, prayerfully, find that we’re drawn under their branches, their rough bark against our back, the leaves rustling overhead, the smell of the fruit catching our nose.

Just as a tree branch doesn’t look like a root, or the acorn it originated from, so these scriptures impact us in our “now” in sometimes very different ways then how they were first experienced without thus suggesting that those very different meanings aren’t in some sense connected.

 So, to the story at hand, though none of us will, in this lifetime ever view Jesus of Nazareth glowing like sun in front of us, invites us into the wonderful and challenging process of following Jesus in our now by helping us understand that the way we learn isn’t all the different to what the first disciples had to learn.

It confronts us with all the regular psychological problems and opportunities that are in any communication or relationship

The other day I was reading about Virgil; Virgil had cataract surgery in his mid fifties; he had developed them when he was six years old. After surgery all he could see at first was a general opaque light; even after a while he had quite a bit of trouble distinguishing objects; he had difficulty distinguishing, for instance and “A” and an “H.” His brain was trying to make sense of all the information that was flood in via his optic nerve.

Virgil’s story, told by Oliver Sacks, the science writer and doctor, illustrates that we learn to see; we don’t just see. And, scripture teaches us, we learn to exercise our spiritual sight with similar challenges.

Vision is always selective, we focus on certain things, we exclude certain phenomena from our attention. But in Christ, the Holy Spirit is challenging those exclusions; seeking to open us to new ways of seeing, new ways of seeing God, the scriptures, new ways of seeing each other and our neighbours, new ways of understanding what’s important in our politics!

*Of course, this learning to see with the Holy Spirit’s help is messy; we may find ourselves liable to do what Virgil did and what Peter did; imagine that the light itself, the experience itself, is the point when what the story as a whole reveals is the process of illumination; a way of seeing that is beyond just seeing what is immediately in front of us, but a way of seeing that is also a way of listening, a way of understanding.*

In other words, in order for the readings to speak into our “now,” we are led, slowly, but persistently by the Spirit beyond what we might imagine as obvious!

What was obvious to Peter was to continue the experience as it initially appeared to him: build some huts! Bask in the glow! But this was not what God ultimately intended him to see or to do!

In order for things to come into focus; in order for these words to be heard, we need to take time to focus, take time to listen, take the time to enter the grand conversation that is the Great Tradition.

As the Church has learned to “see this scene,” as it has taken seriously the voice of from heaven which urged Peter and now us to “listen to Christ’s voice,” we have recognized that the conversation must include Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets and that Christ as one who sheds light on both does not do away with them but draws out their deepest significance; history and our now, the roots and the branches.

Peter’s own insights and processes, however bumbling they might appear to us in light of what is going on, are nothing less than what is required for each of us; it’s how focus, it’s how understanding comes.

The Christian way of revelation, of epiphany, is never just brute facts, never just “experiences,” but interpreted words, interpreted, conversed about words and experiences.

It turns out that, not only the original followers, but all of us, need the whole package that we have in this story: flashes of recognition and illumination and then ongoing conversation of their significance;

 that is, we need a community of interpreters and then we need the courage to take our fledgling insights into our work and families, not because we have all of it worked out, but precisely because we don’t, precisely because each day, each relationship reveals both our lack of faith *and* Christ’s presence!

We live in a world where competing claims to knowledge are on display in a way that makes us wonder if we can ever get at the truth! This week’s “she said,” “he said” between Wilson-Raybold and Trudeau is indicative of the fact that nothing in our public discourse is obvious anymore!

We are awash in so much information, but not only that, competing narratives that spin that same information so differently that we’re left to wonder “what can we know and how?”

Can we ever say, along with Paul, “since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness!?”

Here again, I think the bumbling openness of Peter is our best guide; when we are truly desiring the truth, we are acting in concert with God’s mind who never puts a political spin on divine love and acceptance.

Will we get it right the first time? Probably not, Peter’s rambling on about building huts and then he and his fellow followers failure to bring healing in the next part of the story even though at the beginning of the chapter they had been commissioned to do just that is hugely encouraging to me.

What I see is Peter desiring, Peter trying, Peter learning! On the final Sunday of Epiphany we learn that this is the process of revelation of epiphany, in us!

We open ourselves to truth when we desire it; we open ourselves when we admit that complete understanding eludes us but we’re willing to follow the voice of Christ as best we understand it.

And as long as we’re prepared for the process of correction, of genuine interpretive learning, we too will learn to see! And even more importantly we will learn to listen!

Then whether on the mountain, or down in the valley, in worship or in service, whether successful or not we will come to recognize that learning to see, learning to listen to, learning to *do* the truth is something that Christ’s light is enabling at this table, with us, right now!