

LAST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99; II Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration is the story of a glimpse of glory. Just before the beginning of Lent, every year the church goes mountain climbing. We go, like Peter and James and John did, following Jesus. At the mountain height we see him as he really is. By him, with him and in him, the glory of God shines. The season of Epiphany ends as it began with a shining star. Jesus the Day Star, the bright and morning star, shines here on the mount of Transfiguration as the light from heaven shone above his cradle in Bethlehem thirty or so years earlier.

But why? Why do we climb to see this light? Why do we take valuable time away from our busy lives and devote ourselves to climbing the mountain where God's glory is revealed? Aren't there hungry to be fed, jobs to be done? Aren't there bills to be paid? Children to be fed and clothed? Sick to be healed?

Mourners to be consoled?

So why does Jesus take this time away from his mission? Why do we? Mark Twain once said: "You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus."

We climb the mountain of Transfiguration each year before Lent begins for the same reason Moses climbed Mount Pisgah, to get a glimpse of the Promised Land, to see where we ourselves are headed. "Come dance with the West wind, and touch on the mountaintops," wrote John Denver. "Sail o'er the canyons, and up to the stars. And reach for the heavens, and hope for the

future, and all that we can be, not what we are." All that we can be, not what we are.

When Jesus arrived at the mountain top, his figure changed and the outside of him, which had been ordinary and like us, shone as if he was not like one of us. Jesus shone with the glory that caused Moses to shine that day on the mountain of Sinai, when the holy law from heaven came down. He shone with the glory that carried Elijah up to heaven's height, gone from this world, but alive in the next. He shone with the glory of his own baptismal day, when his Father's voice from above was heard to say: "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased", and indeed those words first uttered at the River are repeated on the Mountain Top.

What can mere mortals say when faced with such glory? "Let all mortal flesh keep silence" says the old hymn. But not Peter, his philosophy is when in doubt, shout it out. First say the obvious, "Lord, it is good for us to be here." Then make a plan without listening: how about we prolong this camp-out on the mountain, Lord? We can rig up a tent for you and Elijah and even one for Moses. But that, of course was not the point.

Jesus was facing the long journey to another mountain, where he would be lifted higher. Jesus knew that ahead was the long walk to the cross, with all its possible escapes and sidetracks. Jesus knew that he could walk away from the will of the Holy One.

Jesus knew that he had a way out of this, but Jesus also knew that he would not take it. He knew that his death was only weeks away.

As unlikely as it seems, the scripture tells in many places that to be like Jesus is our destiny; that the intention of God, in his calling of us, is to make us like him. We are destined for glory, a glory like his, a glory that will make us shine as he shone.

But first, as with Jesus, there is cross to bear. And so, each year we climb the mountain of Transfiguration with him. We climb because there is a rough road ahead of us. We climb to share the vision that Peter and James and John witnessed, and to be strengthened by it for our return to the lowlands, and for the days before we receive the fulness of the glory that Jesus gives to us through his death and his resurrection.

Imagine Jesus seeking the face of His Heavenly Father as he drew near to the time of his sacrifice, and finding in the example of Moses, the great lawgiver, whose face was unveiled when he talked with the Heavenly Father, and in Elijah, the great prophet who was both afraid, and yet willing, to challenge the kings of the earth, both the strength and the courage for the road ahead. Jesus looked ahead to the choices of the Passion, and God gave him the vision and the strength he needed: the vision and the strength to walk with us in the long steps of life's journey. And God, too, wills to give us the vision and the strength we need, the vision and the strength to face the fears of our lives, the vision and the strength we need to respond to the call of God to live beyond ourselves, to live lives of sacrifice and courage till the glory we see in Christ settles on us, not just for a day, but forever.

The road ahead is the way of the cross. In the weeks to come we will be reminded that the Lord did not go straight from his baptism to heaven. He went out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. We will remember that he walked the path of suffering for us, that he prayed for us, that he fought the spiritual fight for us. That he bled and died for us. In Lent we remember that God has made the way of the cross to be the way of life and peace, and that our destiny is joined to Christ's destiny.

The glimpse that we are granted of Christ's glory on the holy mountain is the foretaste of heaven; the image of humanity as God intended us to be in creation. As we prepare to bring ourselves into the disciplined walk of faith and devotion during the season of Lent, we remember this glory of God that calls to us. We remember that we, too, will be bright shining as the sun.

The mountain of Transfiguration reminds us that though Jesus walked in the way of the cross, he also rose from the dead in the glory of the Father.

Easter is the end of Lent, its goal. Everything we do in Lent brings us a step closer to the joys of Easter. On the holy mountain of Transfiguration, we taste those sweet eternal joys.

We take strength from them, Christ's strength, as we prepare to walk our Lenten journey together.

AMEN.