

Glory on the Mountain, Ministry in the Valley

Matthew 17:1-9

February 3, 2008

I.

Today We heard how Jesus was transfigured on a mountaintop. He was God's Son, and he could stand in God's presence. And because he actually was in God's presence, his face and clothes took on a radiant appearance that reflected God's glory.

But let's back up a little. Have you ever noticed how mountains are settings for important events in the Bible? Big things happened on mountains. Those events often marked turning points in the history of our faith.

Moses received the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai. Old Testament prophets spoke with God on mountains. A resurrected Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples on a mountain.

When the Bible tells stories about someone going up a mountain, get ready. Something is about to happen; a new revelation is in the works. You just know that God is going to do something or change something in a big way.

But those things that happened on the mountains were not the ends of the stories; they were the beginnings. None of those people went up the mountain to stay. They went up, encountered God, and then came back down—transformed in some way or another.

That's because even though God's glory was on the mountain, God's ministry was in the valley. People went up the mountain for revelation, and came down the mountain to serve humanity.

Today's reading follows that pattern. Jesus and three of his disciples went up the mountain and heard God's word. And each of them, in his own way, came back down the mountain to fulfill God's will. Glory on the mountain, ministry in the valley.

II.

Why does this story come up now, just before Lent? There's a purpose behind today's Gospel. In Episcopal churches all over the country, today is the last Sunday in Epiphany. In those churches people like yourselves are hearing about the transfiguration of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

And today we really have pushed the fast forward button in the story of Jesus' life. During the last three weeks we focused on the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry. We heard about his baptism and the calling of his disciples, which later led to his work of teaching, healing, and proclaiming God's kingdom.

But instead of taking these things in order, we now have jumped ahead to the transfiguration. This is where Jesus began the last part of his life, which was a ministry of obedience and submission to God's will as he prepared to go to Jerusalem, and to the cross.

For us, today's Gospel calls us to think ahead, and to consider our own lives and priorities. Just as Jesus' destiny loomed over the horizon, we also are anticipating a time of reflection, prayer, and submission to God's will as we prepare for Ash Wednesday in just three days.

III.

As we stand on the threshold of Lent, what can we learn from today's readings to help us in the time ahead? How do these readings prepare us for the observance of a holy Lent?

We can start by recognizing that although Jesus and the three disciples walked up a real mountain to hear from God, we climb a spiritual mountain on our knees, in prayer, meditation, and reflection. And as Jesus and the disciples came back down the mountain to live out God's plan for humanity, we get up off our knees and go into the world where God's people await.

So, in some ways today's Gospel is less about an opportunity to help ourselves, and more about an obligation to help others. How typical is it to think of ourselves during Lent? How typical to think of what we give up? What if this year we instead focused on others during Lent? What if our discipline was not to deny ourselves, but to give to others?

IV.

Today's lessons point in that direction. What are the important parts? As Christians, we believe Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. During most of his life on earth, however, people only saw his human nature and his divine nature was not visible. Outwardly, in terms of his physical appearance, he basically looked like most everybody else.

That all changed on the mountain, and there the three disciples saw his divine nature. Jesus was no longer of this world, but of the heavenly realms of Moses and Elijah who were with him. The Son of Man was now the Son of God. For a moment the veil was pulled away, and the disciples saw a preview of the glory of the resurrection.

And why were Moses and Elijah there? It could have been Abraham and Isaac, or Samuel and David, or any number of other patriarchs of the faith. Why Moses and Elijah? Well, Elijah was the first and the greatest prophet. And Moses was the first and the greatest lawgiver. So, in those two are combined the law and the prophets, which were fulfilled in Jesus. Once again, the disciples saw a preview of what was ahead.

Finally, we are told that God spoke from a cloud, and proclaimed his solidarity with Jesus in words similar to those used at Jesus' baptism. In this case, however, it is important to note that God did not speak to Jesus, but rather to the three disciples. God told them "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." God wanted them to know that Jesus was speaking for God, and one more time the disciples had a preview of things to come.

V.

And that preview led them, just as it leads us, from the mountain into the valley. And by valley, I mean the world where God's people live and die, where they prosper and suffer, where they feel joy and pain, and where they know the Lord, or they don't. That's the valley, the world, where Jesus labored. It's where the disciples preached the Gospel and began to build the church. And it's where we are called to extend ourselves to each other in the name of Christ.

We can't do that on the mountain top. That's not where God wants us to stay, even though it might be tempting to do so. We might want to escape from life's difficulties, and sometimes churches encourage that. It might be more comfortable inside the church's doors than outside.

But there is a danger with churches that only offer us the mountaintop and do not call us into the valley. If a church is confused about its identity, or if it does not have a clear mission that its people understand, then it can become a place of hiding rather than a place of sending.

And so while we reach up to God in our worship, we reach out to each other in our common life. That's how we can be true to our call as Christians. You don't go to the mountaintop to find the hungry and the needy, or those who suffer, or those who barely exist on the margins of life. They are here, among us now, needing our help and looking to us for hope.

That is a very real part of the gospel message today. It was important that Jesus and the three disciples went up the mountain to hear God's word, but it was equally important that they came back down and were obedient to God's will. The same applies to us. We climb the mountain to prepare ourselves to go back down. Real ministry is in the valley. If we honor that as we undertake our Lenten disciplines we will be blessed, and when the Holy Spirit goes before us we cannot fail.

VI.

And this prepares the way to speak briefly about how the Holy Spirit fits into this picture, for it is only through the Spirit that we can experience the glory of the mountain and live into our call to minister in the valley.

We also heard in today's Gospel that Peter wanted to build three shelters. Most theologians think this meant that Peter had no idea about what was going on, but didn't want it to end, and tried to prolong the moment.

Obviously, however, heavenly beings do not need earthly shelters. If this had happened today, and if Peter had a camera, he probably would have asked Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to stand a little closer together so he could get a picture.

But that image of Peter in the Gospel, before Pentecost, is very different from his image in the New Testament reading that we heard earlier this morning. In the New Testament lesson, which is from a letter that Peter himself wrote after the Holy Spirit rested on the disciples at Pentecost, it is clear that he finally came to understand what had happened on the mountain.

What brought about Peter's transformation? Why is this portrait of Peter described in the New Testament reading far different from the earlier portrayal that appeared in the Gospel?

Peter was transformed by the same thing that transforms us. It is clearly and compellingly described in the Book of Acts. For Peter it was the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost. For us, it is life in that same Spirit, given at baptism, lived in truth, and grounded in worship.

So, what Peter thought he saw on the mountain where he wanted to build shelters was only a prelude to his monumental work in the valley where he helped to build the church. And, for him, as for us, the Holy Spirit was the difference. If we rely on our own perception we will see dimly and miss the meanings. But if we rely on the Spirit to lead us, we will be living into our Christian responsibilities.

VII.

Although the Easter story is the basis of our Christian hope in the next world, today's readings are at the core of Christian call in this world. We beheld Jesus' glory on the mountain, and we witnessed his obedience as he returned to the valley and his destiny. And we saw a bumbling and foolish Peter who later was transformed by the Spirit into one of the saints of the church.

These images guide us today. As we experience our own spiritual mountaintops and as we hear others calling to us from the valley, one message endures. One unalterable truth tells us how to be faithful, how to live in the Spirit, and how to care for those around us. One unalterable truth makes possible all that we can ever hope to be or do. It is what God told the disciples, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Those words to the disciples span the centuries to reach us today with the same force and power with which they came out of the cloud. "This is my Son. Listen to him." *Amen.*