

Moses
Matthew 17:1-9
March 6, 2011

I.

This is one of the church's high Holy Days, always celebrated the Sunday before Lent begins. We hear the story of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain.

And have you noticed how mountains often have been settings for important events in the Bible? Big things happened on mountains. They often marked turning points in the history of our faith.

Today's reading from Exodus, for example, tells of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Several other Old Testament prophets spoke with God on mountains. After his resurrection Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples on a mountain. The setting of the awesome events of today's Gospel was a mountain.

And so, when the Bible tells about people going up a mountain, get ready. Something is about to happen. You just know that God is going to do something, or reveal something, or change something, in a big way.

But those mountaintop events were not the ends of the stories; they were the beginnings. Moses and the prophets did not go up the mountain to stay. Jesus did not go up the mountain to stay. They encountered God and came back down transformed in God's will.

That's because God's glory was on the mountain where he appeared, but God's ministry is in the valley where we all live. People went up the mountain to receive God's word, and they came down the mountain to serve humanity. God's voice on the mountain changed things in the valley. Glory on the mountain. Ministry in the valley.

II.

And 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? I would like to offer four perspectives as we consider our Lenten disciplines. All of them are evident in today's reading.

The first is our call to ministry. The second is our call to obedience. The third is how the Holy Spirit can lead us to fulfill those obligations. And the fourth is our eternal salvation that was previewed for us as Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah.

Ministry. Obedience. Spirit. Eternal salvation. The first letters of those words spell "Moses," don't they? How about that? Must be a coincidence. Ministry. Obedience. Spirit. Eternal salvation.

And at this point I should say that some experts would say I am about to violate a basic rule of preaching. They say a sermon should cover only one theme or idea, and here I am with four. But I think the readings for today compel us to consider these themes. Feel free to let me know after the service whether you agree with those experts.

III.

We begin with "m" for Ministry. Although Jesus and the disciples walked up a real mountain to hear from God, we climb a spiritual mountain on our knees, in prayer and reflection. And as Jesus and the disciples came back down the mountain to live out God's plan for his people, we get up off our knees and go into the valley to be with those people.

And by valley, I mean the world where our brothers and sisters live and die, where they prosper and struggle, where they feel joy and grief, and where they know the Lord, or they don't. That's where Jesus labored. It's where the disciples began to build the church. And it's where we are called to reach out to each other in Christ's name.

You don't have to 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.

So, in some ways today's Gospel is less about helping ourselves, and more about helping others. We naturally tend to focus on ourselves during Lent. We usually think about what we will give up. However, what if this year we instead focus on others during Lent? What if our discipline is not to deny ourselves, but rather to do things for others?

IV.

This leads from ministry to obedience; the "o" in our memory word of "Moses." What did God's voice say from the cloud? It said, "This is my Son. Listen to him."

And note that God was not speaking to Jesus or Moses or Elijah, but rather directly to Peter, James, and John in real time in this world. It was not a vision or a dream. And the Gospel says that voice was so fearful they fell trembling to the ground. If recording equipment existed back then, it might have been possible that this divine voice could have been preserved.

And no one could have misunderstood. The message was clear. God did not speak in parables or use metaphors. No Bible translator ever had trouble figuring out what God meant here. But do we always take God that seriously? Do we hear what the disciples heard? Does the spiritual creator of the universe get the same attention that we give to the material parts of creation?

I believe 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." And when we do that we will live with the blessings of God's peace.

V.

And now comes the letter "s," which reminds us of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives. For perspectives on the Spirit we can compare the description of Peter in the Gospel with Peter's own description of this Gospel event, written several years later, which we heard in today's New Testament reading.

In the Gospel Peter wanted to build three shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Under the circumstances that sounds a little silly, doesn't it? Many theologians think Peter had no idea about what was going on, but needed to say something and so he just blurted out something.

Obviously, however, heavenly beings do not need earthly shelters. And they all were in God's presence. If this happened today, and if Peter had a camera, he might have said something equally foolish like asking Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to stand a little closer together for a picture.

But that image of Peter in the Gospel, before Pentecost, is very different from his image in the New Testament reading we heard earlier. In that reading from a letter that Peter himself wrote after the Holy Spirit rested on the disciples at Pentecost, it is clear that he understood the meaning of the transfiguration and God's voice from the cloud.

So, 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?

The answer is that Peter had been transformed by the same divine miracle that transforms us. It was the Holy Spirit given to him and to others at Pentecost. And for us, it is life in that same Spirit, given at baptism, grounded in truth and worship.

Only through the Spirit can we know God's will, and if we rely only on our own perception we, like the early Peter on the mountain, will see dimly and miss the meanings. But when the Spirit leads us we, like the transformed Peter, can be examples of the life God wants for us.

VI.

And so we approach our final idea. We have talked about "m," and "o," and "s," signifying ministry, obedience, and the Spirit. Now we come to the last theme, which expresses the "es," or our eternal salvation that was previewed for us on that mountain.

This also was the event Jesus described to his disciples a few days earlier when he said that some of them would not taste death before seeing the kingdom (16:28). It was a preview for them, as well.

And just as with movie previews, one of the purposes of this Gospel preview is to make us more interested in the entire movie, so to speak.

But the feature length version of this movie has not yet been released, and that will not happen until Jesus comes again to complete God's kingdom. There are, however, some things we can consider now in advance of that momentous day.

And we start with the transfiguration itself. As Christians, we believe Jesus was fully human and fully divine. During most of his life on earth, however, people only saw his human nature. Outwardly, in terms of his physical appearance, he basically looked like most everybody else.

That all changed on the mountain, and there the disciples saw Jesus' divine nature. Jesus was no longer of this world, but of the heavenly realms. The human Jesus was revealed as the godly Jesus, and the disciples saw a preview of his future glory in eternity.

And of course Moses, our memory word for this sermon, also was there, almost fifteen hundred years after his death on earth. While Moses bones might still have been in the grave, his soul was with the Lord. Luke's Gospel says that Moses appeared "in glorious splendor" (9:31), and thus he also was visible evidence of our own anticipated glory when we enter eternity.

VII.

Today's readings embrace a lot of history and no small amount of theology. But what do we do with them as we come to the altar next Wednesday and contemplate our faith for the Lenten season that follows?

William Blake, an eighteenth and nineteenth century English poet and painter once used two images that can describe the choices we might have. One was the image of a cistern, and the other a fountain. For the younger among us, a cistern was used to collect rainwater for later use. And so a cistern contains, but a fountain overflows.

Unfortunately, there are many cisterns in the church. Some churches operate like social clubs, as private organizations that keep everything inside for themselves. Others, however, overflow with God's love and their abundant efforts to make the church known in the community.

I believe St. Thomas is in that second category, and I pray that during Lent we not only will practice our individual Lenten disciplines, but also that the Spirit will lead us to take Jesus' glory from the mountain and share it with those in the valley. *Amen.*