

Last Epiphany 2021

‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with[a] power.’

We hear most gospel lessons so often throughout our lifetimes, that we frequently tune out quickly because we know the story. We know what happens next. We can recite from memory about Jesus’s birth and resurrection. The same is true about the transfiguration for many of us. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all talk about it. 2 Peter 1 also refers to it:

“16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved,[j] with whom I am well pleased.” 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain”.

I know that the times I have preached about this, my first thought is always about that mountain-top moment that the three apostles experienced. But I think that it is often a good thing to look at an old familiar story in a new way. Shortly before Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain, he had told the disciples that he would soon suffer and die. Their reaction was not good, especially Peter’s.

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. 32 He said all this quite

openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'"

We are not told exactly why Jesus decided to take Peter, James, and John up the mountain with him and not the rest of the disciples. But it does appear that when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he saw looks of confusion, surprise, and even doubt, as they struggled to understand what He had said to them about his coming death, as well as Peter's confrontation with Him. They needed reinforcement to get them through the days ahead. Jesus chose these three to see something so fantastic that it was unimaginable.

Personally, I think I that Peter gets a bad rap on this trip up the mountain with Jesus.

Understandably, he was **absolutely** awestruck. It was to have been a quiet retreat, a time apart from the crowds, a time for Jesus to pray. But an extraordinary event was unfolding, a moment in history so sacred that Peter had to say something. So, he proposed building physical booths or shrines to preserve the moment. A cloud surrounded them, however, before Peter could throw anything together. Out of the cloud a voice said: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (v. 7).

There is a myriad of reasons why his idea was impractical, but I can understand where he was coming from.

The Transfiguration is the moment that the disciples got a glimpse of who Jesus really was, when they saw for certain that he was more than just a man. Jesus stood before his disciples, on the top of the mountain, and before their eyes he changed. He changed from a rabbi with an intimate

connection to God into a God-man, who was greater than Moses and Elijah put together. This glimpse of who Jesus could become -- of **who Jesus really was** -- left the disciples stunned.

Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica said this in a 14th century sermon on the Transfiguration: "So also, in the teachings of the Fathers, Jesus Christ was transfigured on the Mount, not taking upon Himself something new nor being changed into something new, nor something which formerly He did not possess. Rather, it was to show His disciples that which He already was, opening their eyes and bringing them from blindness to sight." (End quote)

We know who Jesus is, but I for one, would have loved to see what the three apostles witnessed. Who can blame Peter for trying to memorialize what happened? Have we had close-encounter moments with Jesus that we tried to hang on to? Obviously, a mountain-top experience does not have to be on a mountaintop. Most are not. For myself, the one that I most remember actually did occur up in the mountains. I acutely remember how it felt even 40 years later. It was a powerful experience for me. The problem is that other valid experiences tend not to measure up because that particular event can never be recreated and is held housed in a shrine within my mind. How many times do all of us struggle to find the words to describe a transfiguration moment that we have experienced? A moment with Jesus that is so profound we struggle to understand what happened; let alone trying to explain it to anyone else. And even if we try, most of the time, others cannot see what we saw.

Once upon a time, a man took his new hunting dog on a trial hunt. After a while, he managed to shoot a duck and it fell into the lake. The dog walked on the water, picked up the duck and brought it to his master. The man was

stunned. He didn't know what to think. He shot another duck and again it fell into the lake and, again, the dog walked on the water and brought it back to him. What a fantastic dog – he can walk on water and get nothing, but his paws wet. The next day he asked his neighbor to go hunting with him so that he could show off his hunting dog, but he did not tell his neighbor anything about the dog's ability to walk on water. As on the previous day, he shot a duck and it fell into the lake. The dog walked on the water and got it. His neighbor didn't say a word. Several more ducks were shot that day and each time the dog walked over the water to retrieve them and each time the neighbor said nothing and neither did the owner of the dog. Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, the owner asked his neighbor, "Have you noticed anything strange, anything different about my dog?" "Yes," replied the neighbor, " come to think of it, I do. Your dog doesn't know how to swim."

So many Jews never saw Jesus for who he was. The disciples thought that they knew. Jesus **needed** Peter, James, and John **to know**, so they could carry on once he had left. What does all this mean for us today? We know who Jesus is. We know that he had to suffer, to be crucified, and that he rose from the dead. Yet we also need these mountain-top experiences throughout life, when we encounter the Risen Lord intimately, surprisingly, and sometimes shockingly. We cannot stay on the mountain-top forever. Building shrines do not work because we may not ever get back. It is not a matter of **if** we will encounter trouble or disappointed in our lives; it is **when**. The disciples come down from the mountain and right away, encounter work that needs to be done. Mountain-top Sunday becomes Valley Monday. No time to sit and reminisce about what had just happened or to bask in the warmth of the experience. There was too much to do. In fact, as we know, Jesus specifically told them not to say anything until the

time was right. They did not understand what Jesus rising from the dead meant. But they definitely had a new understanding of who Jesus was.

I believe that it was out of a deep love for his disciples that the transfiguration took place. Confusion, fear, doubt, and sadness were around the corner and courage would be needed. It is pretty much the same for us.

This past year has elicited a cacophony of anger and violence, of crying and wailing, fervent prayer and distant silence. We have been surrounded by resounding gongs and clanging cymbals. We are not out of the woods yet. And too often love sits out on the periphery. We stride forward with hope because of the courage we find in Jesus. We do not have to personally witness the Transfiguration to believe. *There are days it would be nice though.* Our work as Christians is not up on the mountain but instead down in the valley of daily life. It is the reality we live in. But guess what?

God **loves** us; Jesus **holds** us; and the Holy Spirit **burns** within us. The Blessed Trinity is always right there with us every step of the way. As we begin this Lenten season, on Wednesday, maybe we can find ways to **allow God to meet us** where we are at. And if that happens to elicit a Mountain-top experience, savor it. Then return with Jesus to the Valley and go back to work.

Amen!