

Transfiguration Sunday II Peter 1:16-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

¹⁶ We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (Rev. 22:16 I am the Root, the Offspring of David, the bright Morning Star).

This Sunday provides an important element of structure within the church year, both in how it looks back over the season of Epiphany and how it also looks forward through the season of Lent to Easter. The Sundays in Epiphany are “framed” between the Baptism of our Lord and His transfiguration. The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ Baptism and of His transfiguration each tell us that the voice from heaven acknowledged Jesus to be God’s Son. In His ministry we are given proof that Jesus is the true Son of God incarnate in the flesh, and this is just as the voice of God the Father also testifies both at the Baptism and at the transfiguration.

But the Sunday of the Transfiguration also anticipates the glory of Jesus’ resurrection. The transfiguration and the resurrection then together “frame” the season of Lent from the outside (just as the Sunday of Jesus’ Temptation and the Sunday of His Passion frame this season from within). Finally, the transfiguration, in depicting Jesus “appearing in glory” on the mountain, also points ahead to the Last Day when He will appear again in glory—and so the Last Sunday after Epiphany also looks forward to the Last Sunday of the church year.

The Sunday of Transfiguration closes out the season of Epiphany for us. We end this season as we began, with a voice from heaven declaring that Jesus is God’s Son, beloved and to be listened to. It has one foot in Epiphany and the other

stepping toward Lent. Jesus will come down from this mountain, set his face for Jerusalem, and in the next chapters announce his intention to be handed over, crucified and resurrected.

This is not only the culmination of Epiphany, it is the launching point for our Lenten Fast and our whole Paschal season. The Jesus who carries that cross up the mount of Calvary, had ascended **this** mountain to speak with Moses and Elijah. And because he was the One to whom **they** reported as prophets, His death has meaning and significance even today, even 2000 years later.

And when we celebrate the Transfiguration of Our Lord, we should also take note of "the cloud" that figures so prominently in our texts for the day. In both the Exodus reading and in the reading from Matthew, the cloud is an essential feature. You may recall how the Lord in His glory led the Israelites in their desert wanderings. His presence went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21). The pillar of cloud also descended upon the Tent of Meeting whenever Moses went in to speak with the Lord (Ex. 22:9). On the Mount of Transfiguration, a bright cloud overshadowed the transfigured Jesus and the voice of God spoke from it (Mt. 17:5).

In Jesus' story there is yet one more cloud of importance—that is, the cloud of ascension. On the fortieth day of Jesus' post-resurrection ministry, He and His disciples were gathered. Jesus was teaching them about the kingdom and of receiving the Holy Spirit. As He was teaching, "...he was lifted up and a cloud hid him from their sight" (Acts 1:9).

Also of significance is the timing of the cloud's presence: it covered the mountain six days, but on the seventh day the Lord spoke to Moses out of the cloud. The timing calls to mind the six days of creation and the seventh as the Lord's day of rest. It also calls to mind the seven-day week when Christians worship in honor of Jesus' resurrection and then busy themselves with their work in creation the other six days. The circumstances reinforce the scriptural understanding of a God who hides and a God who reveals himself. God hides himself in creation. His presence there is ambiguous. You are always uncertain as to whether God is in creation for you or against you. But on that seventh day,

the first day of the week, celebrated in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection, on **that** day, God calls to you just as He did Moses. On that day, our Lord reveals his glory to you, the glory as of an only Son (Jn. 1:14). Our Lord reveals Himself unambiguously as "for you" in the preaching of Jesus Christ, Him crucified, and Him alone handed over to be the life of dead sinners like you and me.

This may be a good time to look for the presence of Christ in our worship. Are we now in the presence of this Jesus who shines like the sun, as our reading says today? Peter, up on the mountaintop, did not understand that very well. We are equally befuddled about being in the presence of Christ when we come to worship. Jesus comes down from that mountaintop to be with us in the mundane and everyday lives that we lead, rendering them holy.

In the Gospel reading, God reveals Jesus to three disciples: Peter, James, and John. In this worship, God reveals Jesus to us. Peter in his confusion says, "It is good that we are here." He is caught between joy and fear, and he is going to try and somehow contain this event and keep it for himself, and God intervenes with voice and cloud. Does He do this to thwart Peter's plans?

Is our hour on Sunday a time of fear or of rejoicing for us? Those would seem to be the only options, but so many of us come to this worship event blasé and expecting nothing and not having that expectation challenged by anything we see or hear. Do we feel neither fear nor joy? Do we confess with Peter that it is good Lord to be here?

Peter gets to see Jesus in His glory with Moses and Elijah, the two pillars of the Jewish faith. And yet he says that we have something even surer, the prophecy of the Old Testament whose authors were carried along by the Holy Spirit. I think **we** often want the experience which Peter had. We find our Bibles and the proclaimed Word of God to be somewhat passé, but Peter suggests that it is better than the experience he had.

What does the Transfiguration do for **us**? Peter would have us believe his witness and read more carefully the OT and presumably his words to us as well. But that can hardly exhaust the purpose of Transfiguration for us today. Does it simply give us a reason to question our very human desire for a mountain-top experience?

If we look around at other churches, we might see pastors who are zip-lining into church, rock concerts on a stage, but is all this effort to create a “mountain-top experience” really distracting us from the reality of the forgiveness, the Absolution and the Sacraments, in which Christ is there, as promised by God, secured by the very Word of God?

Peter says he has evidence. But many are not looking for evidence. The people who are looking for an experience of Christ will not likely be convinced by that. What is more, Peter is still talking about this experience 30 years later. But he exhorts his reader to a deeper and more careful reading of the Bible. One cannot deny experience on this day, but one can hear the fellow who had the experience tell us that the experience drove him back into his OT Scriptures, a scripture made surer by the experience.

Will that change the way we read the Bible? Is it better to have been there and to have seen the miracles which Jesus performed, or is it better to have the apostolic witness, testimony, and interpretation of those events which comes to us in Holy Scripture? Does a part of us really wish we could have seen the feeding of the multitudes and tasted that bread or watched the lame walk and the blind rejoice in their sight? Is that in fact a part of us that is trying to escape the uncertainty of faith that dogs us in postmodern life? Are we in fact better off having the disciples thoughtful, faithful, and Spirit-led reflections on these events than they were in being there?

In John 20, Jesus called all of us who believe without seeing “blessed,” something He does not say to Thomas in the upper room in that week after Easter. Have we just got a serious case of “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence,” when we long to see the miracles that Peter saw? Or, in fact, do we get to see those miracles and more, (John 14:12) but our minds and attitudes shaped by the Enlightenment have simply dismissed the miracle with some explanation and thereby dismissed the presence of God in much of our lives?

How do we recapture the sense of holy awe when we come to the Bible and worship? I suppose a shining cloud and a deep voice that knocks us flat would be

a good start. But instead, we get a Jesus who puts His hand on our shoulder and says, "Don't be afraid." We have an Elijah experience of God, not in the fire and wind and earthquake, but in the still, small voice (1 Kings 19:12). Right here in our sanctuary we are going to have an experience of God forgiving our sins, of eating and drinking His body and blood, of hearing His voice in the Scripture and sermon. Why is that not enough for us? Are we just the generation with "itching ears" that Paul spoke of in II Timothy?

Do we need fireworks to have God? Do we need strobe lights and fog machines? Three disciples had one night of this, and three years of walking dusty roads with Jesus.

Why do we come to worship? Is it not because Jesus is here? Is this not His Church? Does He not refresh and make us new in this hour? Hear His sure and certain word. Receive His body and blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins, life and salvation. Taste and see that the Lord is good. And He can do far more than you could ever ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20)! Amen!

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you until the Last Day dawns and the bright Morning Star appears before your eyes. Amen!