

Last Sunday After the Epiphany
Matt. 17:1-9

Coming Down the Mountain*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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Around ten years ago, I participated in a six-month program involving the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. Are any of you familiar with the Exercises? The Exercises, which were offered through a local Jesuit parish, are a 450-year old method of prayer developed by the founder of the Jesuit order. Normally, the Exercises are done over the course of a 30-day retreat. But for those of us who can't take an entire month off from our family or work responsibilities, it's possible to do the Exercises for approximately one hour a day over the course of several months.

At the heart of the Exercises – and Ignatian spirituality in general – is an encounter with Jesus through prayer. You visualize being present with Jesus at various points of his life, from the annunciation to the ascension. It is a profoundly incarnational method of prayer because you imagine the sights, sounds, smells, taste, and touch of the environment around you. You are invited to inhabit the gospel story from the perspective of a character who you are drawn to (such as an apostle or a bystander), and then you have a conversation with Jesus about your experience.

On some mornings, I found the Exercises to be just OK. But on other mornings, I found the Exercises to be quite profound and bordering on the mystical. I experienced situations in which I was so lost in prayer that I literally didn't want it to end. I would have much preferred to continue praying than getting ready for work or making coffee for Michael. But, like all experiences, my encounter with Christ had to come to an end. It was time to come down the mountain.

Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany. We've spent the past seven weeks reflecting upon the light of Christ and the profound ways in which that light manifests itself in the world. But it soon will be time to come down the liturgical mountain. The season of Lent begins in three days, and our attention will turn from the divine light to the journey towards Jerusalem and the painful passion and crucifixion of Jesus.

In our lectionary, the gospel reading for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany is always the story of the Transfiguration. As you may know, the actual feast day of the Transfiguration – which is also our parish's name day – occurs much later in the year, on August 6th. However, we hear about the Transfiguration today because the event plays an important role at the close of the Epiphany season. The Transfiguration is, of course, a key manifestation of the light of Christ. But it is also a reminder of the need to come down the mountain.

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In today's gospel reading, Peter, James, and John are led up a high mountain by Jesus. There, they see him transfigured, with his face shining like the sun. Suddenly Moses and Elijah also appear, representing the law and the prophets, and they are conversing with Jesus. Peter's typical bumbling response to this revelation is like my own reaction when I've been lost in prayer. He says that it is good for the disciples to be there, and he offers to make three dwellings on top of the mountain. Peter wants to stay up there. He wants to capture or hold onto the mountain-top moment. He would be perfectly happy sitting on top of the mountain all day – and all night – and contemplating the divinity of Christ.

Back there, in the mortuary chapel behind the organ, is a stained glass window reproduction of a famous painting of the Transfiguration by Raphael. The window was originally located over there, right above the high altar, and it depicts the Transfiguration in powerful artistic terms. I invite you to check out the window after mass.

Specifically, the window contrasts the divine beauty of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah from above, with the harsh reality of the world below. At the top of the painting is Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, arranged in a symmetrical and orderly fashion. Right beneath them are Peter, James, and John, who are awestruck on the mountain top. And beneath them at the foot of the mountain are the other apostles who are crowded and milling around in chaos with many others, including a boy who is possessed by a demon. It's no wonder that Peter would like to stay on the mountain-top.

We hear about a similar contrast in today's first reading from the Book of Exodus. In that reading, Moses ascends Mount Sinai and comes face-to-face with the glory of God. Moses stays on the mountain top in the midst of this theophany, which is described as a devouring fire. He is covered by a cloud for seven days and then for forty days and forty nights. But eventually Moses has to come down the mountain and face the Israelites, who had built a golden calf while he was away. Moses couldn't stay on the mountain because he needed to lead them through the wilderness towards the promised land.

Returning to today's gospel passage from Matthew, we learn that Peter, James and John couldn't stay on the mountain either. They eventually had to come down. The vision suddenly ends, and only Jesus is left standing there. The point of the Transfiguration is that these apostles are given a glimpse of Jesus' divinity and true self. And it is this revelation that will sustain them through the painful journey to Jerusalem that lies ahead. The same holds true for us, as we journey from Epiphany to Lent. To paraphrase the collect of the day, we ask that the light of Jesus' face help to strengthen our own bearing of the cross over the coming forty days – and beyond.

On this Last Sunday after the Epiphany, I would like to suggest that the very last words we hear at mass each week – “Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord” – are central to our self-understanding as a parish community. The deacon directs us, in liturgical terms, to come down the mountain. “Go.” It is certainly wonderful to bask in

the candlelight, the glorious music, and the clouds of incense that we experience weekly in this place. But we are ultimately called to walk out those doors and live out the values of the Kingdom of God.

What are we called to do, as a parish in the midst of the incredible riches *and* the incredible poverty of midtown Manhattan? How are we called to go out into the world to love and serve the Lord? How do we respond to these challenging times with its particularly challenging needs? How do we carry on Transfiguration's storied history of soup lines, the Underground Railroad, and meeting the pastoral needs – such as weddings and funerals – of those who were not welcomed by the more “respectable” churches in the City?

I invite you to engage in some Ignatian prayer during the rest of this mass. Imagine that you have met and spoken with the transfigured Christ on the mountain top. What is the experience like? What does Jesus say to you? As you come down the mountain, how are you and the parish uniquely called to “go in peace to love and serve the Lord”?

The point of Sunday morning is never just Sunday morning. The point is how we are sustained by the Word and Sacrament at mass so that we can love others during the rest of the week. The point of the Epiphany is never just the Epiphany. It is how we are sustained by the light of Christ to carry us through Lent and Holy Week. And the point of the Transfiguration is never just the Transfiguration. We are called not to reside in museum-like dwellings and memorials, but to come down the mountain.

As followers of Christ, we do not exist for ourselves but for the world. As Canon Brandt reminded us last week by quoting Archbishop William Temple, the church is the only society in the world that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. Let me say it again: the church is the only society in the world that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members. May we be strengthened by the light of Christ during the coming Lenten season. And may we be strengthened to come down the mountain and to live out our parish's motto of “Fides et Opera” – faith and works. For faith without works is dead.