
Transfiguration of the Lord – 2020

2 Peter 1: 10-19 & Matthew 17:1-9

The high mountain in the Bible symbolizes the border zone between heaven and earth. It is a zone that separates the material and the spiritual. It was necessary to rise to those heights to obtain what was necessary spiritually and enable the work to be done down in the valley. Don't we often prefer the 'high ground' to the 'low valley?' God would tell us that the low valley or the earth is where our work is done.

For modern readers, the story of the transfiguration of Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning is one of the most difficult to understand. Yet, the meaning is clear. If we want to share in Jesus' glory, we must be prepared to participate also in his suffering. (Matthew 17: 1-9)

Earlier when Peter called Jesus the Messiah, he rejected what Jesus said about His suffering and death. Jesus tells Peter he is correct in calling Him the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But Jesus rejects Peter's idea that He should not suffer and die. Jesus calls Peter Satan for tempting Him to define Himself by glory but not by suffering.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up onto a high mountain. Before their eyes, he is transformed. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes become white as light. Moses and Elijah appear and talk to Jesus. "It is good for us to be here," says Peter. Peter then says that they should build tents for each of the three, "if you wish." There is no indication at this point that Peter is afraid or does not know what he is doing. Jesus does not respond to this offer, but while Peter is still speaking, a cloud overshadows them. A voice from the cloud is like the voice at Jesus' baptism. The voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Now at the sound of God's voice, the disciples are filled with terror.

Matthew refers to what happened on the mountain as a vision. What is meant by this is that the "seeing" of such an event is not a natural function of ordinary human eyes but made only possible by God. God grants the disciples the power to see what otherwise would have been invisible to the human eye. This same word is also used in Acts 17:31, where Moses is "viewing" the burning bush.

On the way down the mountain (called the Mt of Transfiguration), Jesus tells them once again that the Son of Man must suffer. He tells them also not to tell anyone about what they have seen and heard. Only after the resurrection may they do so. They return to the valley discussing Elijah's part in the restoration of all things. And then Jesus is met by the needy crowds and heals a demon possessed child. These verses tell of Christ's glory, but the vision does not last. Jesus must return to the valley to attend to all the needs of the world. The disciples also cannot remain on the mountaintop. They, too, must follow Jesus and help in his work of healing and comfort to those who need him.

The life of discipleship for us also is not resting on high mountains, but we must come down into the valley where most of life occurs, to help and heal wounded people. The divine voice commands us to listen to Jesus. But just as we hear Jesus, we must also act on his words. If we only sit and listen, nothing will be done, and we will not be doing what God has asked us to do. Jesus invites us to walk along with Him and He promises us that He will be with us as we continue God's work on earth.

Amen!