



Transfiguration Sunday

Sermon by Revd Sharmain James



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READINGS

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

The Transfiguration of Jesus

Lent begins Wednesday, and today, the final Sunday before the solemn observance of that holy season, is called “The Transfiguration of the Lord – where we recall that mountaintop moment where Jesus appears fully human and fully divine.

Have any of you ever climbed a large mountain? It would be a lot of work, but just think of what you could see from up there. Robert Frost in his poem “The Mountain” describes a conversation between two ordinary people. One who is not in the least bit impressed by the grandeur of the mountain and the other one is excited and charmed by the enormous mountain.

One of the characters a farmer sees the mountain as a barrier. He constantly lives and works just near the mountain and though he always intends to climb the mountain, he never really does climb it. The mountain thus stands before him, as a symbolic and a real challenge, a barrier to be overcome. Isn't there something sad about this farmer who has spent his entire life staring up at the mountain's looming form, but never once ventured to the summit? All he knows about it — and about the mysterious, spring near the top — he learned second-hand.

How is it for us when it comes to our knowledge of God? Does all that we know of God depend on the hearsay of others, or does it find its grounding in something we've experienced first-hand? If someone were to stop any one of us and ask what it's like to have a “mountaintop experience,” would we be able to share anything meaningful? That's a question Jesus' disciples Peter, James and John might have had a hard time answering — until that day they followed Jesus up the side of the mountain, huffing and puffing all the way to the summit.

At the top, they saw something entirely unexpected — not a bubbling spring, whose water seemed to run cool in summer and hot in winter, but Jesus “transfigured” before them. When the fleeting experience was over, they knew their lives would never be the same.

Matthew tells us that Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. During this transfiguration, two of the greatest Old Testament figures appear, - Moses and Elijah. Why Moses and Elijah? There may have been a number of reasons:

Moses represented the Torah, the Law; and Elijah personified the prophets – together they symbolized the fullness of the Hebrew Scriptures;

Both Moses and Elijah had visions of the glory of God on a mountain—Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:15) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8–16).

Both of them had unique endings—Elijah was taken directly to heaven - while Moses, whose grave was never found - is said to have been taken directly to heaven.

Their appearance on the mountain with Jesus indicates the greatness of Jesus, who transcends them both as the One who will be declared the Son of God.

Jesus would be one with them on all of these issues. Fulfilment of the prophecies would be at a price.

Peter - suggests that he erects three tents. He wants to stay on the Mountain Top, to stay in the moment of glory. There is Peter, like so many of us: overworking, over-functioning, barely taking a second to stop, catch his breath and behold the wonder unfolding before his very eyes! Some moments are simply meant to be savoured for what they are, not preserved for the future.

Have you ever been at a tourist spot where people are taking pictures and videos with their smartphones? They are so desperate to preserve what they're seeing that they barely even see it.

Our Mountaintops

Where are the mountaintops in our lives? Where do earthbound people like us stand a better chance of encountering the living God? No one, of course, can dictate where God's going to show up — the spirit-wind "blows where it chooses," as Jesus taught Nicodemus (John 3:8). Even so, there are certain things we can do to position ourselves in the right place at the right time.

Today — here on the threshold of Lent — is a good time to think about these things because of the various commitments we can choose to adopt as part of our Lenten discipline.

1) For a starter, we can pray.

This is more than the hurried grace before dinner, the sleepy-eyed bedtime prayer, or the swift request beamed to God in a moment of spiritual panic. The only way to truly ascend to the mountaintop in prayer is to practice a patient, contemplative kind of prayer. Such prayer is more watchful waiting than conscious thought, more silence than speech. And yes, it does require a dedicated time.

2) Another way of ascending the mountain is to read the Bible.

Again, this requires dedicated time, not a few seconds here and there amidst the frantic multitasking of our days. There are ways of reading carefully chosen Bible passages devotionally, ways that allow us as readers to brood over the text, attuned to what God the Holy Spirit is trying to say to us.

3) Still another way of opening ourselves to God's presence is by: Listening to his Son Jesus.

Before we move into the season Lent as we will this week on Ash Wednesday, the church invites us to climb a mountain in the company of Jesus and his close friends to witness & participate in a strange event in which Moses and Elijah appear in a conversation with Jesus, as he is transfigured and a voice from heaven, the voice of God, declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" These words from heaven are the same words we heard at Jesus' baptism.

But here, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice continues — addressing the 3 chosen disciples saying, “listen to him”. The command, listen to him, also transforms the 3 disciples from passive observers into participants. The disciples’ response out of awe on that mountaintop was to try & freeze the moment – to whip out their phones and turn on Face Book live stream. And it is exactly at this moment that the voice of heaven intervenes and lays waste their desire. “Listen to him” which drives them all to their knees, and must mean something like “Don’t try to hold onto this moment. Rather, let it contain you and take you where it will.”

According to the Eastern tradition what changed on the Mount of Transfiguration was not so much the person of Jesus but the perception of the disciples. They saw clearly and, with undistorted vision, who Jesus truly was.

And so it is with us, when we are available to the motions of the spirit deep within us. – whether we are on top of a mountain. We, too, can see with undistorted vision. But, like Peter, James, and John, we are well advised to “listen to him”. And so, “listen to him” becomes an invitation to us – to journey with Jesus down the mountain and along the road, up to Jerusalem and to the cross and through the cross into that field we call Resurrection.

Through prayer, Scripture reading and listening to the voice of Jesus— ordinary spiritual disciplines — we, too, can ascend the mountain. We can open our hearts to whatever God is ready to do with us.

The season of Lent provides many opportunities for spiritual mountain-climbing. We don’t need the strength and endurance of an athlete. All we need is persistence, and the willingness to set aside the time needed to make the ascent.

Take as much time as you need; the mountain will still be there. These 40 days of Lent can become just a string of dates on the calendar, or they can be a season of true spiritual growth. The choice is up to each one of us.

But one thing’s for sure: If you never begin to climb, you’ll never know the glories of the summit. Amen