

Sermon for Last Sunday after Epiphany  
February 19, 2023  
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Los Alamos, New Mexico

Exodus 24:12-18  
Psalm 2 or 99  
2 Peter 1:16-21  
Matthew 17:1-9

Today is the Last Sunday of the season after the Epiphany.  
So short a season to perceive the manifestation of the divine  
amidst the human.  
And we end with that bright, shining hope,  
poised on a mountain top,  
bequeathed to humankind in the witness of a bumbling Galilean,  
who is given the keys to the kingdom.  
This is a transfiguring event.

This is it.  
No longer the witness of shepherds  
or Magi of a birth foretold  
by the voices of angels and the movement of stars,  
but the witness of three men standing with their teacher.

They hear again what was said at the baptism:  
“This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.”  
And there comes the admonition:  
“Listen to him!”

And we are told independently by Peter in his epistle  
of this voice they heard coming from heaven:  
“This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And we heard Peter affirming:

“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.”

Peter pleads with his people.  
“I am not making this stuff up.  
I was there with two other of his disciples.  
We saw this with our own eyes,  
we heard this with our own ears.  
This is the truth. God spoke to Jesus and we heard it.”

It is the glory of God come down to earth,

bestowing a blessing on Jesus the son,  
and on the disciples who are with him.

It is the glory of God resting on the shoulders of the man  
who taught the disciples to be better human beings.

“This is my beloved son.

To him I give glory, laud and honor.”

And if that isn't clear enough, God adds:

“listen to him.”

Let's go back to the beginning of the reading today.

“Six days later,  
Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John  
and led them up a high mountain, by themselves.”

What happened six days earlier?

Peter acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah,  
and was dutifully rewarded with the keys to the kingdom:  
“You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church.”

Personally, I am convinced that when Peter called Jesus the Messiah,  
his understanding was that of most Jews at that time:

the Messiah would come in great glory  
and throw off the oppressors of God's people.  
The Messiah would be the King of the Jews,  
a warrior in the line of David to lift up Israel to rule itself again.

That was not the messiah that Jesus describes to his disciples.  
And when Jesus tells them that the Messiah must suffer and die,  
Peter exclaims: ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’  
And I can imagine all the disciples nodding their heads in agreement

And Jesus turns to Peter and the disciples:  
“Get behind me, Satan!  
You are a stumbling-block to me;  
for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

So six days later, on the seventh day,  
Jesus takes his friends, Peter, James and John,  
up to the mountain with him to show them the truth of his words.

The transfiguration was not a highlighting of Peter's confession,  
but showing Peter and James and John  
that Jesus' kingship was not what they thought it was,  
but something entirely different.

So we find Jesus with Moses and Elijah,  
and what does Peter want:

Let's turn this into a Kodak moment.  
Let's freeze this event in time and make it last forever.  
So, blundering forth, Peter blurts out:  
"Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish,  
I will make three dwellings here,  
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

How human of Peter to want to save that mountain top experience.  
It is just so endearing of Peter.  
Here's us. Right here.  
Telling God we want to make this moment last forever.

Asking the impossible,  
that we don't have to leave that place where we are most comfortable,  
most at home, most happy.

And not only that,  
but being told that having experienced something  
that is just staggering, and wondrous:  
"Tell no one about the vision  
until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany.  
We have seen the birth of the Christ Child,  
the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan when the Heavens parted  
and the voice of God spoke to us directly,  
and the appearance of God's glory on the mountaintop.

In three days we will be observing Ash Wednesday  
as we enter the 40 days of Lent.  
We descend from the mountaintop into the valleys,  
where we live our lives.  
These long weeks of self-reflection,  
as we wander in our personal wilderness,  
need not be a time of darkness.

Remember the glory,  
the light,  
the hope of the world.  
That point of departure from mountaintop to valley  
as we move relentlessly forward toward that bright light of Easter.

This may not be a direct path.  
It probably won't be.  
I came upon a prayer by Thomas Merton,  
that wise Trappist Monk.  
As we wander this Lent,  
let us each remember his words.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore I will trust you always  
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Amen