

**Gospel**

**Matthew 17:1-9**

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "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." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

*See the World through God's Eyes and be Transfigured*

This is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the last Sunday to say Alleluia, the last Sunday before we enter the solemn season of Lent. And today, we are worshipping on the top of a mountain. If you have read much scripture, you may have noticed that mountains are very important in the Jewish and Christian spiritual landscape. A lot of life changing things happen on mountaintops. Noah's Ark comes to rest on a mountaintop as the flood waters recede. Abraham almost sacrifices his son, Isaac. Moses talks to God face to face and receives the law. Elijah hears the still small voice of God. Maybe it is the arduous journey as we hike to the peak. Maybe it is the breathtaking view. Maybe it is the thin air that causes us to become lightheaded. Somehow, up on top of a mountain, where the earth reaches towards the sky, we feel closer to God. In today's gospel, Peter, James, and John have been invited by Jesus to join him on top of a high mountain and their lives are about to change. They reach the peak of the mountain *and Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*

Before I talk any more about what happened on top of that mountain, we all need to remember what was going on in the six days before Jesus invited them on this hike. Six days ago, Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is. And the disciples share with him the speculations of the crowds "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." And then Jesus asks his disciples the really important question, "Who do you say that I am?" I imagine that a hush fell over them and not a few disciples looked at their feet hoping Jesus wouldn't call on them. It was Peter who blurts out the truth, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus blesses Peter for this revelation from God and promises to build his church on Peter, because he is solid as a rock. I imagine that all the disciples must have felt incredible joy to know that they were following the Messiah, the Christ, the son of God sent to save the world.

Before the disciples even have time to enjoy their own fantasies of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth with Jesus at the throne, he starts telling them about how he will journey to Jerusalem and be handed over to the elders, tried, convicted, and killed. He tells them about the suffering that he will endure and the rejection and the hatred. The disciples are shocked, disappointed and upset. Speaking for all the disciples, Peter, the rock-head, tries to convince

Jesus that all this suffering and death is *not* the inevitable future of his beloved Rabbi. But Jesus knows how the world works. He knows that only the devil can convince us that we are invincible. Jesus knows that to save your life, you have to be willing to lose it. And Jesus, who blessed Peter a few short days ago, now curses Peter, calls him Satan and tells him to step aside. The rock upon which the church will be built is looking a little unstable. The disciples are lost, swirling in chaos and confusion, wondering how the messiah could be subject to suffering and death and *not* triumphantly establishing an earthly kingdom of orderliness, life, peace, and tranquility.

It is in this state of chaos and confusion, Peter, James, and John begin their hike with Jesus. I bet they didn't talk much as they walked, lost in their own thoughts. And then, when they reach the top, Jesus is transfigured. They see him in a whole new light. They know it is him, but he suddenly looks very different. I don't think that Jesus has changed on top of that mountain, I think he is the very same Jesus they have been following all along. I think that the disciples have changed. They reach the top of the mountain and they receive the ability to see Jesus as he really is. They no longer see a Rabbi who teaches the Torah, they no longer see a healer and miracle worker; they no longer see their own images of the Messiah. Suddenly, Peter, James and John see Jesus the way God sees him. His face shines like the sun and his clothes blaze brilliant white. All their doubts and confusion evaporate with this divine vision that they are blessed to behold.

Have you ever looked down the wrong end of a telescope? Everything that you see looks smaller and farther away. I imagine that this is the way that we, like Peter and all the disciples of Jesus, are prone to view each other and the world we live in. We peer at the world through our narrowing lenses and we can only see a shrunken image of the vast creation we live in. We cannot see the full potential of every human being. We see a small horizon and we believe that our hopes and dreams must fit within this petite box. We cannot see the big picture. I'm not sure what makes us use the wrong end of the telescope. Maybe it is fear, maybe it is what we've always been taught.

Every once in a while, we hear Jesus inviting us up a steep mountain for a better view. Something happens to us on the hike up and our telescope gets turned around. We reach the top and suddenly we can see the world the way God sees it. Every miraculous detail is distinct and beautiful. The horizon is vast and the possibilities are limitless. Everyone's face gleams with the presence of God because we can see them exactly as God made them. We can see in each other the image and likeness of God's own face. The world is transfigured right before our eyes because we are finally looking through God's end of the telescope.

I feel like today, we have been invited up a steep mountain to see our world in a new light. We are worshipping a bit differently, blessed with Jazz music and singing gospel hymns. Our bodies sway with the rhythms and our eyes adjust to a new and larger horizon. We are looking out of the other end of the telescope and suddenly the world looks larger, brighter, and more full of possibility. We look different. Jesus looks different. Not because anyone has changed, but because we have been given the gift of seeing the world through God's more expansive and gracious eyes.

When we have these moments of seeing the world the way God sees it, then we are truly transfigured. If seeing is believing, then every mountaintop vision we have transforms our belief to know more clearly the God who loves us. We can never forget the vision we have been given. We know that the world is bigger and deeper and more lovely than we can normally observe. Even when we come down from the mountain and return to our narrow and fearful perceptions,

we believe that the world is really a much more glorious place, glowing with the light of God's love.

From this mountaintop of worship today, we must descend with Jesus and enter into the valley of Lent, where the shadow of death is close by. On Wednesday, we will face our own mortality, head on, receiving the dust that we will become right on our own foreheads. We will journey all the way to the cross and see the darkest vision of Jesus crucified, while somewhere in our spiritual memory we hold the true image of Jesus, transfigured and dazzling with God's love for the world. If seeing is believing when we are on the mountaintop, then believing is seeing in the valley. No matter what sorrows or sufferings we witness, we believe that God can see the goodness, hope, and redemption that is present within us all.

Amen.