

## **Last Sunday After the Epiphany**

**February 19, 2023**

Exodus 24:12-18

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

Psalm 2

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Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. And each gospel writer includes it in a section that begins with Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ. In each of the gospels, this larger unit functions as a pivotal moment in the writers' narratives, the moment in Jesus' ministry and journey he set his face toward Jerusalem. Peter's confession prompted Jesus to begin teaching his disciples about the nature of his identity and the inevitable consequences of his mission and ministry, ultimately leading to his death. This revelation was a blow to the disciples' understanding and expectations of God's Anointed; it didn't align with their hopes for freedom and vindication. And, as if that wasn't enough, Jesus didn't stop there. He went on to explain that any who would follow him must follow the same path he takes. To be a disciple is to take up one's own cross, to learn how to lose one's life for the sake of finding true life.

Matthew tells us that it was six days after all this that Jesus took Peter, James, and John up the mountain and there he was transfigured before them. There, in the face of the uncertainties and anxieties created by Jesus' announcement of his looming death, the glory of God was revealed, and the disciples' vision transformed. In response to beholding this vision, Peter offered to make three dwellings – one for Jesus and one each for Moses and Elijah, who had joined Jesus in conversation. Before he could finish his thought, Peter was interrupted by another manifestation of God's presence as he and the others were enveloped in a bright cloud and commanded to listen to and obey Jesus, the beloved of God. Quite understandably, the disciples fell to the ground in fear. It probably didn't take much convincing for them to agree to Jesus' command that they do not tell anyone about what they witnessed until after he'd been raised from the dead.

Though each tell it with a different slant, the gospel writers all mean to contextualize this story in who Jesus is and the implications of his identity for his life and the lives of his disciples. Jesus is affirmed the beloved of God, chosen for a particular purpose, a purpose that will ultimately lead to the cross. But the cross is not the end of Jesus' journey. The glory revealed in the transfiguration points forward, to the glory of God revealed in Jesus' resurrection. As we stand at this juncture in our liturgical season, we are bid to look ahead, to recall and bear in mind the mystery of Easter as we leave this Season after the Epiphany and enter Lent.

But there's another part to this storyline that each of the gospel writers include in their telling. Jesus, James, John, and Peter return to the valley to be accosted by a helpless father begging for his son to be healed. The pairing of the mountaintop transfiguration with the despair in the valley suggests each is significant for the interpretation of the other. One common way of interpreting these two stories is to suggest that the glory mysteriously revealed on the mountaintop is equally present in the valley below. Often in this line of interpretation, the mountaintop stands metaphorically for those moments in life when we seem to be lifted out of the "common," the "ordinary," and the "mundane," where the presence of God is tangibly experienced. In contrast, the valley stands metaphorically for the everyday, for the lived experience of chaos and crises in which it often feels impossible to "see" God.

There is value to reading these two episodes in such a way. If nothing else, it is a reminder on this last Sunday after the Epiphany that God came to us, and continues to come to us, in Christ, in all the circumstances of our lives. God's glory and presence cannot be confined to the transcendent, to be experienced only by those in the "inner circle," nor can finding God's presence and seeing God's glory be understood as reward for conquering the mountain. Rather, God's glory and presence are accessible even in those valley-moments of life when all sense of stability and certainty seem to have faded away and we're left with only a desperate plea for freedom.

I will admit that the last couple of years have made this an especially difficult assertion to believe.

- Where is God's glory being revealed in the ongoing crises of this pandemic?
- Where is God's glory in the explosions of bombs and the violence of war?
- Where is God's glory in the spilled blood of our black and brown siblings that fill the streets of our nation?

On the one hand, the pairing of these two stories in our gospels suggests that those mountaintop experiences are necessary for us to be able to truly discern where God's presence and glory are being revealed in the valley. On the other hand, this pairing also challenges our incessant attempts to keep the sacred, sacred – separate from the ordinary and the common, to keep it stationed in its own compartment of our lived experience. Like Peter, we want to remain *there*, where the ground is holy, and the presence of God is tangible. On the mountaintop, we are not weighed down with trying to understand the chaos and suffering of the valley. On the mountaintop, we can escape the needs and despair of our lives and the lives of those around us.

But escapism was not what Jesus was after when he led the disciples up the mountain. For the disciples, the experience of divine glory and encounter with divine presence was meant to tune their ears to, and train their eyes on, the One who's very being emanates the radiance of God. Peter cannot make sense of what he sees – *but*, he recognizes something in this moment that compels awe and wonder in the depths of his heart and being, something beyond the ordinary. Somehow, though, that recognition seems to dim in Peter just as Jesus' brilliance dims when the disciples look up at Jesus' touch. The glory of God they had just experienced seemed to be left up there on the mountain and the disciples failed to see the connection between that transcendent moment and the power of the gospel for an anguished and powerless father.

In all of this, I see a tension between understanding and awe, between a vision and our capacity to articulate its meaning. This tension seems to be presented here as the crux of our life of discipleship. God is not stationed on the mountaintop for the select few to seek, experience, and hoard for themselves. But neither is God absent from there. Nor is God stationed in the mundane, as if the grandeur of God's beauty and liberating love could be contained in ordinary alone. No, God's glory has no boundaries. There is no mountain top or valley that can obscure the view of God's glory as it is revealed in Jesus Christ, in the God-made-flesh who dwelt among us.

And perhaps the challenge that this passage presents to us this morning is to embrace the complexity and paradox of our life of faith and our discipleship. To stand not in fear but in boldness, not in silent stupor but in joyful awe and wonder. In her debut book, *This Here is Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley, creator of Black Liturgies, writes,

“I think awe,” or wonder, “is an exercise, both a doing and a being. It is a spiritual muscle of our humanity that we can only keep from atrophying if we exercise it habitually... Awe is not a lens through which to see the world but our sole path to seeing. Any other lens is not a lens but a veil. And I’ve come to believe that our beholding – seeing the veils of this world peeled back again and again, if only for a moment – is no small form of salvation” (31). [1]

The exercise of awe is not escapism, nor is it projecting a false sense of optimism onto the difficult situations of our lives. Riley goes on to suggest that the practice of awe and wonder is the practice of beholding the beautiful through “having the presence to pay attention to the common place. It could be said that to find beauty in the ordinary is a deeper exercise than climbing to the mountaintop” (32).

As we make the seasonal turn into Lent this week, the story of the transfiguration charges us to take the time to cultivate our practice of awe and wonder. Let us tune our ears to hear and train our eyes to see beauty in all of its forms, in all of its human messiness, and in all of the mundane and ordinary parts of human existence. We will find, as we work the muscles that allow us to practice awe and wonder, that God is indeed working in us through the Spirit to transform us into the same image of God’s glory shining unrestrained through the varieties of human existence.

May God so grant us the power of that vision! Amen.

[1] Riley, Cole Arthur. *This Here Flesh: Spirituality, Liberation, and the Stories that Make Us*. NY: Penguin Random House, 2022.