

TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

February 2/3, 2008

“The Light of the Transfiguration”

Matthew 17:1-9

Today we're celebrating the last Sunday of the Epiphany season – a Sunday that is known as “Transfiguration Sunday.” It's a Sunday that's been set aside in the life of the Church to remember and celebrate an event that took place in our Lord's life and ministry on a mountaintop outside of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago – an event that's recorded for us in today's Gospel lesson. This transfiguration came at a pivotal point in Jesus' life and ministry. He had completed three years of public ministry and he was now preparing for his impending suffering and death on a cross for the sins of the world. Our remembrance and celebration comes at a pivotal time for us as well as we wind up this Epiphany season and as we prepare for the coming season of Lent.

Looking back, we remember that Christmas, which we celebrated just a month and a half ago, showed us, in the words of St. John, that “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” The epiphany season, once again in the words of St. John, showed us that “we have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.” In a very real way, then, Christmas showed us that Jesus is true man and Epiphany showed us that he is also true God. And that's an important thing for us to remember as we enter Lent if we are truly to appreciate Jesus' suffering and death on our behalf.

For Jesus, the light of the transfiguration, helped him to prepare for the awesome task that lay ahead – the task of dying for the sins of the world. It gave him one last opportunity to literally commune in the glory of the Father and, in that, to be empowered, if you will, for the completion of his mission, the very mission he was commissioned to begin in a very similar event when he was baptized in the Jordan River, anointed with the Holy Spirit and proclaimed to be the beloved Son of God with whom His Father was well-pleased. You see, in his baptism Jesus was prepared to begin his mission and in his transfiguration he was prepared to complete it.

For his first disciples and especially for the three who were with him that day – Peter, James and John – the light of the transfiguration gave them one last glimpse of Jesus' true glory – glory as of the only begotten of the Father – just before they were to witness his suffering and death on the cross. For them this was a mountaintop experience that would help them not only understand the completion of Jesus' mission but also the beginning of their own that would be given to them following his death and resurrection – the mission we call the “Great Co-Mission” – the mission of making disciples for Christ by proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

And now, we, who have been made Christ's disciples through the carrying out of that Great Commission by those who have gone before us, are privileged once again today through Word and Sacrament, to have the light of the transfiguration shine upon us as well. Thank God! For as we seek to carry out the mission that the Father has given us and especially as we move from Epiphany to Lent, we too need to see that glory that is Jesus' once again – the glory that he shares with us in and through His ministry to us and that He seeks to share through us with others. We too need a mountaintop experience in the light of the transfiguration.

Some years ago, in a former parish, I visited a young man who had visited our church on a Transfiguration Sunday. And during the course of my visit, he said that he wished he could have a mountaintop experience like Peter, James and John did. In fact, he said he wished God would just send a lightning bolt through the roof of the room in which we were sitting and strike a nearby lamp at that very moment. Then, he said, he would know for sure that it was all true. We waited but nothing happened.

Then I shared with that young man that God doesn't usually work that way. Although He certainly has and still does great and glorious things in extraordinary ways, he more often chooses to do great and glorious things in very ordinary ways using very ordinary means – ways that are perceived only by the eyes of faith. And it's true. With ordinary water God gives new life to people and makes them brothers and sisters with that glorious Christ and members of His family. With ordinary bread and wine God comes to His family to strengthen their faith and to assure them of their place in the body of Christ, His Church. With ordinary words spoken in confession and absolution, God hears our pleas for mercy and forgives us our sins for Jesus' sake. And with ordinary people, like those of us who are here this day, He makes His presence felt in the world as we share our love and faith and hope in him with others. Indeed, the light of the transfiguration still shines but it's only seen by the eyes of those who believe.

And as our eyes are opened by the power of the Holy Spirit active in Word and Sacrament again today, we will see that light too. And when we see it we too can be empowered to face whatever the future has in store for us and to complete the course that God has given to each of us. We too can look forward to Lent and the opportunities it will present to us to reflect and repent and to be renewed. And we too can look forward to the time when we will see Jesus and His glory face to face in heaven – but only after we, like him, complete the mission God has given us to accomplish here on earth.

May the light of the transfiguration not only shine on us today but may it shine through us this week as we move from glory unto glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.