

2.27.2022, Transfiguration of Our Lord

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Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2; Luke 9:28-36

“Act with boldness and freedom”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Where do you live? Do you live on a remote and desolate mountaintop, or do you live below the mountain? Like the saying, “Home is where you live,” all of us live below the mountain, so to speak. We might go to a mountain retreat center or a mountain home for vacation and renewal, but none of us would want to live on a desolate mountaintop, bereft of human community. We are created for human community.

In today’s gospel, Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up a mountain, not to live, but to pray. For a very brief time, Jesus left the everyday world behind and sought out a remote place of quiet for prayer. Today, we might call what Jesus did a “spiritual retreat” or a time of “prayerful renewal” so that he might be reenergized for ministry in the world below the mountaintop.

We don’t know the name of the mountain that Jesus climbed with his disciples. It is not named in scripture. An early Church Father named Origen, identified the mountain as Mt. Tabor, while modern scholars have argued that perhaps Mt. Hermon could be the site of the Transfiguration - but we don’t know. However, it is perhaps good that the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured is not named, because it leaves open the question of our own ongoing transformation as Jesus’ disciples living and working below the mountaintop.

Today’s gospel begins with the words, “*Now eight days after these saying... Jesus went up the mountain to pray.*” What happened eight days before Jesus went up the mountain? Eight days before this, Jesus had asked his disciples the question, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Eight days prior to Jesus’ transfiguration he asked his disciples a question, and in answer, Peter confessed that Jesus is “*the Christ of God.*”

“*Who do you say that I am?*” led to Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, and that led to Jesus’ explanation that he would suffer, be rejected, killed and raised on the third day. Jesus then invited his disciples to daily deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. These are the “sayings” that Luke tells us preceded Jesus’ journey to pray on the mountain.

When Jesus climbed the mountain to pray, what was the world like that he was leaving behind? Luke’s gospel tells us that before Peter’s confession, great crowds followed Jesus to Bethsaida, where he spoke to them and healed many. At the end of that day, the crowds were hungry and Jesus

commanded his disciples to feed the five thousand people who had gathered there. The world that Jesus briefly retreated from for prayer was a world of great need, illness and hunger. It was also a politically charged world, occupied by the Roman army and Roman rule. People suffered then, much as they do today, with illness, hunger and even occupation by foreign troops. The world that Jesus came to serve and the world that he prayed for on the mountain is very much like our world today. It is a world of great need, and a world in need of prayer and God's help.

So great were the needs that even Jesus, had to retreat for prayer. I think there is something very powerful for us to learn here. While Jesus was praying, he was transfigured - transformed so that he radiated his divine glory. Jesus' need for prayer tells us that he was also fully human. Jesus completely shared in our humanity. He understood illness, hunger, and injustice; he had compassion for the crowds, and he also needed time for the renewing transformation of prayer.

Jesus' transfiguration began in prayer and this tells us something quite profound. I have long said that prayer changes us; prayer transforms us. On the holy mountain, Jesus was seen by the disciples talking with Moses and Elijah, two figures familiar with the transforming power of prayer in God's presence. Moses, too, had climbed another holy mountain through a dense cloud of darkness, so that he could meet God. Elijah, running for his life, met God in the silence of the wilderness after earthquake, storm and fire.

As Peter babbled about wanting to build three dwellings on the mountaintop, so that they could stay, a cloud overshadowed them and a voice said, "*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!*" This voice also tells us, as well, to listen to Jesus. Listen to the one who was transformed in prayer, radiating divine glory. Listen to the one who invites you to deny yourself, follow him, and serve others alongside of him.

"*Listen to him*" are words that will also transform us. Yet we struggle with these words, "*Listen to him.*" The world says, "Follow your heart, but Jesus says, "*Follow me.*" The world says, "discover yourself," but Jesus says, "*Deny yourself.*" The voice on the mountain did not say, "Listen to the world and its leaders," rather, the voice said, "*Listen to him.*" This is what mountaintop experiences give us. They give us a perspective upon ourselves and the world in which we live. God is still speaking. God wants us to listen to the only voice that has the words of eternal life.

In today's second reading, Paul says, "*All of us...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*" Paul is talking

about the transformation that happens to each of us when we stay close to Jesus. When we listen to him, we will always be able to act with boldness and freedom. Jesus frees us to live for and suffer with others. The only way to clearly see ourselves, the world and its needs, the only way to clearly act in the world is by listening to him, by following and serving with him.

Today on Transfiguration Sunday, we glimpse the divine mystery of Jesus who transforms us into his image so that we might live for the world below the mountain. The season of Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday, and with it, we again have the opportunity to spend time in prayer that will renew and transform us. Lent is a time to “*Listen to him*” so that transformed by him, we might act with boldness and freedom for others in this world of suffering, injustice and human conflict.

What makes Jesus different from the many other holy figures in world history? Jesus prayed on the mountaintop, and then came down the mountain to serve others. Jesus lives today to offer peace, healing and resurrection in a world of war, sickness, and death. Jesus did not stay on the mountaintop; rather, Jesus came down from the mountain and gave his life for this world of suffering, brokenness and human conflict. Jesus lives today to transform you so that you might live in service to others. Listen to him, and act with boldness and freedom for others in need.

In our own time of social strife, ongoing divisions and new wars, whose voice will you listen to each day? Whose voice offers you transformation? Whose voice will enable you to act with boldness and freedom for others? Will today’s mountaintop media sages and pundits transform you? Today’s leaders offer you their glory, but will it last and can they transform you like Jesus? Whose voice will you listen to on your human journey? Whose voice has the power to transform you over and over into God’s image? Whose voice allows you to see God’s image in your neighbor and in your enemy?

As we prepare for Lent and the way of the cross, today we are reminded of our need to listen to Jesus, and follow him in service below the mountain. Listen to him; be transformed by him; and serve with him each day. In him alone is the power to overcome the world. In him alone is the power to overcome injustice, hatred, war, and oppression.

It all begins in prayer. Take time to listen for his voice. Take time to follow him serving others. For this you have been given life: to live for God and for your neighbor. Pray for your neighbor here and on the other side of the world. Work for peace and pray for peace.

Christ says, “*I have overcome the world*” (Jn. 16:33). “*Listen to him.*” You will be transformed to act with boldness and freedom. With Christ you will transform the world for good. Amen.