

## Gospel - Matthew 17: 1-9

Last Sunday After the Epiphany

Sermon 2-23-20

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### FROM SHADOW INTO LIGHT

#### The Transfiguration of our Lord

I hearken from the plains of Texas – home to cowboys, big belt buckles, country music, and *Yippee-Ki-Yay*. It is not home to mountains. As a child I could scarcely imagine such an aesthetic experience; however, as a young woman I lived for a time in a little village called Giais, near Aviano Air Base, roughly an hour north of Venice. When I wasn't at work, I learned Italian, visited art galleries, and fell in love with the history and symbols of that beautiful country – the piazzas, the people, the pasta! I climbed Piancavallo, picked wildflowers, and lunched on bread, cheese, and grapes – because that's what I'd heard one is supposed to do when on a mountaintop in Italy. But time passes and aesthetic experiences do come to an end. It was time to descend the mountain and return to the plains. But if there's a dearth of mountains on the Texas plains, there's an abundance of harsh, unrelenting light, accompanied by hot, dry winds and searing heat. That's west Texas for ya'.

Unlike me, Jesus, Peter, James, and John aren't climbing a mountain to pick wildflowers or to dine on grapes. And unlike the indiscriminate, glaring light of west Texas, Matthew's gospel describes a brilliant light centered on Jesus himself. No one else present is directly touched by that light, though the disciples are certainly stunned by it. Jesus is transfigured on that mountain by the power symbolized by that light. He is a "changed man", having gone through a metamorphosis: *Jesus*, the man, now becomes the Christ. The face and head that will be pierced by a crown of thorns now shine with the brilliance of the sun. The clothes that will be stripped from his body now have a radiant glow of unearthly light. Matthew's gospel story tells us that Jesus Christ is now promised to the divine world, despite the difficult path he must still travel in this one.

The events that occur in this story on the mountaintop hearken back to Hebrew scripture, and forward to Christ's death and resurrection. This is not the first time a prophet would ascend a mountain in search of revelation. Both Moses and Elijah had met God on a mountaintop – Moses, to receive the tablets of the law as we heard in this morning's Old Testament reading – and Elijah, in his flight from Ahab and Jezebel, to be strengthened by a "still, small voice." And now these two Hebrew prophets return to stand with Jesus.

This will not be the last time the disciples would fall on their faces in fear. They will do so again after the resurrection – and again, Christ will touch them to allay their fears. As he touches them now on the Mount of Transfiguration, they look up to see "... Jesus himself alone". The Hebrew prophets have departed. Without these heavenly companions, without God's heavenly voice, Christ alone is the reality of God's presence with us. And as the disciples descend from the mountain into the mundane world of suffering, they are accompanied by Christ – God with us. It is this light, on this mountain, that will shine a ray of promise on Mount Calvary. This light of transfiguration promises to transform the very cross itself, though it will come at a price.

This month, as we've turned the corner on yet another Valentine's Day and as we've just yesterday bid a beautiful farewell to our friend, Joan, I contemplate the valentines in my life who mean so much to me: My Aunt Virginia will continue to live on in my memory and in my heart. I cherish our son, Paul. I delight in our granddaughter, Johanna. I love my Steve! I enjoy tremendously the warmth and the friendship you've shown. And all the love in my heart can't light an Epiphany candle to the love it must take for Christ to come down from this mountain and walk away from this light to die.

The season of Epiphany that today draws to a close shines with light ... from the glowing star guiding three kings to offer gifts to a baby ... to the dazzling light of his transfiguration some 33 years later. Light is often associated with understanding and revelation – to coin a familiar phrase, “I see the light.”

On the first day of Advent I referenced a scene from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the first book in C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I now add a second, this time from *The Silver Chair*, the sixth chronicle in the series: Aslan and a girl named Jill Pole are high on a mountaintop. From that height everything seems bright and clear – the air, the view, their plan. Aslan gives Jill instructions so that she'll know what to do once she's left the mountain of light and gone back to the shadowed plains below to achieve their mission. When Aslan tells Jill to repeat the instructions he's given her she seems annoyed. (She's a pre-adolescent. What would she be of not annoyed?) Of course she'd remember. But what seems crystal clear here on the mountaintop will become hazy and darkly blurred with her descent - and sure enough - as Jill leaves the mountain of light and insight, she misses her cue and fails to accomplish her first task. She no longer sees the light and is unable to visualize what had seemed so evident.

Why must we come down from the mountain of light to the shadowed plain below where we are faced with life's muck and mire? Why does the sun go down, leaving us in the fearful, confusing darkness of night? Can't the air always be fresh, the view clear, and the light always guide our path? It would seem not. We don't get to stay on the mountaintop, and the sunlight, regular as clockwork, does go down. And so it is with Christ. As Epiphany draws to a close, he descends the mountain through the valley of the shadow of death and into a world of hurt – a world of temptation, betrayal, suffering, and death.

It is the promise of a transforming light shining from a mountaintop – past the next forty days of Lent, beyond Passiontide and Holy Week – to cast its rays upon a cross that would otherwise be just as it appears on its blood-stained surface – a symbol of darkness, despair, and humiliating failure. A metamorphosis has occurred in all its brilliance. “And the grace of God, which passes all understanding,” on this day transforms that blood-stained cross into Christianity's greatest symbol of glory. Amen.