

Last Sunday after the Epiphany, rcl yr b, 2021
St. John's on-line and at home
2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!

It was a frightening thing to happen. Peter, James and John follow Jesus up the mountain, only for him to explode in light in front of them: Jesus was “transfigured before them ... his clothes ... dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” And Peter “did not know what to say, for they were terrified.”

And if this vision of the transfigured Jesus wasn't terrifying enough, a cloud descends; and at this point, let's just say, God has got the attention of the disciples. At which point—with the disciples trembling but listening—from that cloud comes a voice saying: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”

It is *not* the Feast of the Transfiguration today. That's in August. Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany—the last Sunday before Lent. But the story of the Transfiguration is read today because it's so entirely fitting to the last Sunday before Lent.

On the one hand, along with Easter—the Sunday of the Resurrection—the Transfiguration helps to enclose the whole season of Lent in the glory of God in Christ. On one end, we have the glory of the Resurrection; on the other end, we have the glory of the Transfiguration. On the other hand, the Transfiguration draws us into the coming season of Lent, a season of lifting up and bearing our own crosses, a season of self-denial.

So first, on the one hand, we have Lent enclosed in the glory of God, enclosed between the Transfiguration and the Resurrection. We are given, here, with Peter James and John on that mountain but before Jesus has fully turned toward Jerusalem, a preview of the glory that is to come. In a sense, it's something given to us to strengthen us for the journey through Lent, something to strengthen us in the time between the Transfiguration and the Resurrection.

As we struggle (as we inevitably will) with whatever discipline we've chosen, we are reminded that any struggle that has God, and the love of God, as its end is always enclosed within *God's* glory, and not our own.

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With whatever discipline we choose, with whatever we will struggle with as we clear our vision to set our eyes of God, with whatever we do to learn to love God anew, we are reminded that even this effort begins and ends with what God accomplishes for us. That is, Lenten disciplines begin and end with *grace*, with what God does *for* us. With or without our efforts, God's glory is *already* accomplished in Christ.

This is what we would be reminded of, through the Transfiguration and the Resurrection: Lent is already enclosed within the glory of God.

But what about those words heard by Peter, James and John—and now us by extension, as disciples within hearing range of the word of Scripture—“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”? These are the words that now draw us into Lent; words that would remind us that the glory of God does not stand apart from the suffering and death of Jesus, and our following of Jesus into that suffering and death—a suffering and death that is necessary for the fullness of God's glory to be known.

There is an admonishment here. “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Why the admonishment? It is related to those words from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved,” and the command, “Listen to him!”

Well ok, voice in the cloud, listen to what exactly? If we we look back just a bit, we have Jesus speaking *openly* about something: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” “He said all this quite openly.”

This was something that Peter could not abide; and indeed, as Mark tells us, immediately after Jesus says this “Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him.” But for Jesus, this great suffering that he was to undergo is directly connected to what his followers would endure.

And so Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to

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save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

So when we hear the voice from the cloud say “listen to him!” it is these things, things that Jesus was saying quite openly: that he would suffer and be killed; and that this suffering and death would be the pattern of life for his disciples.

So in this way, the Transfiguration doesn't simply bracket and enclose Lent, by giving a hint of the glory that is to come; we are also admonished with the disciples “to tell no one” about what has been seen in the Transfiguration.

But why the admonishment? Because we don't come to know the meaning and significance of that glory until we “listen to him”: and as we come to understand what it means to listen to him, to hear and inwardly understand that he is to suffer, that he is to be killed; and that this suffering and death would be the pattern, our pattern, of life following him.

So in a sense what we are learning is that we don't know how to proclaim the glory of the resurrection as we see it in the transfiguration till we have experienced the suffering that Jesus himself is about to suffer as he turns his face toward Jerusalem, and to to Golgotha.

This is a good time to be reflecting on what sorts of disciplines you might take up this Lent. Will you read more scripture? Will you pray more fervently? Will you fast? Will persevere in acts of mercy? In what way will you be modelling your discipleship not just on Jesus's *teachings*, but on his *life*?

Because if we are to understand fully what is being said in the story of the transfiguration, to *listen to him*, to be attentive to what Jesus has just said—that he must suffer and be killed, and that our discipleship is modelled on this, on denying ourselves, and taking up our own crosses—we don't get to skip that part on our way to the empty tomb any more than Jesus does.

In fact it seems in the admonition of Jesus on the way down the mountain—

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“tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead”—it seems we don't get to experience the fullness of that life, the glory of that resurrection as we see it in the transfiguration, if we don't experience denying ourselves and picking up our crosses.

Now if that all sounds a bit dismal, it's really not; the disciplines of Lent are ways of making space for love—for the love of God, the love of God that makes the love of neighbour possible for us.

But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself—that's the sermon for Ash Wednesday.

But for now, be of good courage—we have indeed, along with Peter James and John, been invited up the mountaintop, and with them we have seen the glory of the Lord. We may not understand, or have the depth of experience, that comes with seeing that glory, until we have lived again through another Lent—but we have seen it, and we have a taste of that glory, we have and know, as we begin again, that Lent is enclosed in the grace and the glory of God.

Lent, and the whole of our lives for that matter, begins and ends with what God accomplishes, and has accomplished for us—it begins and ends with *grace*, with the Glory of God that is *already* accomplished in Christ on the mountain and in the empty tomb.

In the name of the FS+HS AMEN

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons