

Coming Down the Mountain - Transfiguration Sunday 2023; year A

Slide: Jim, Penny and Me

On January 8th, Jim, my mother-in-law, Penny and I traveled up the south shore of Kauai, Hawaii to see the glorious Waimea Canyon. It's sometimes called the Grand Canyon of the Pacific. Although not as big or as old as its Arizona cousin, you won't encounter anything like this geological wonder in Hawai'i. Stretching 14 miles long, 1 mile wide and more than 3,600 feet deep, the Waimea Canyon Lookout provides panoramic views of crested buttes, rugged crags and deep valley gorges. The grand inland vistas go on for miles. And, because of its location up high with valleys below, the pacific air lifts mid-day and often glorious cloud cover comes through, so that if you are still up at the canyon, you can sometimes find yourself walking through clouds.

Slide: In the clouds

It was one of the most glorious mountaintop experiences. It was a deep spiritual experience walking up there. I even remember thinking at the time, "what a great example of the Transfiguration of our Lord story from today's Gospel reading. Jim and I walked within the cloud layer on the beautiful iron rich bright red bedrock for about an hour, but that feeling of euphoria you get didn't begin to fade until I stepped off the airport hotel shuttle, took a few steps on ice and went down fast, breaking my shoulder. Three weeks later, I had Covid 19 that lasted more than two weeks. The mountaintop experience was completely gone. Instead, I entered a time of rather challenging low period, one I knew I could only trust in God to lead me through.

Slide: Waimea Canyon

How many of you here have ever been on the top of a mountain or a peak? It needn't be a very high mountain, just high enough that you can see everything down below you. You can get a sense or feel like you are in the tallest place around you. It can be the top of Mt. Simon overlooking Eau Claire - glorious sunrise there, by the way. It can be in the Sawtooth Mountains skiing in Lutsen or in the Porkies, enjoying the beautiful overlooks close to Lake Superior. One need not go to Mt. Rainier or the Alps to have the mountaintop experience I'm speaking of - that sudden dawning that something bigger than you is grabbing you in awe. It's the moment of clarity, of deep breathing into vastness and goodness, something I would hope all of us could at least know some time or another.

Well, if you have had those times, it is an amazing experience, isn't it? Being on the top of a peak gives you an amazing vantage point. You can see everything up there: ridges, valleys, rivers and lakes. Being on top of the world wherever you are, can be an exhilarating experience, and an experience of clarity. Up there, you are away from everything that bothers you, and it's as if you can be completely free. But, with all mountaintops, unless you are a wild animal, most of us must come down again. In fact, many of you know exactly the kind of experience I had myself coming back from Hawaii. Things are going great and then something happens. And, it is indeed an unwelcome thing. I'm sure you can think of at least one experience right now, maybe several - perhaps occurring even now.

So, let's ponder this for today as we consider the brilliant story of light, epiphany and glory that we have from our Gospel reading today: how would we know how great the mountaintop was unless we also knew what it was like to live down in the pits. In other words, could we ever know the glory of God without it's necessary, direct and downright severe contrast? I wonder.

Slide: Garden of flowers

As you can probably tell, I am making a simple analogy about life. We cannot always experience the feeling of being on the mountaintop, and we certainly cannot keep that feeling going forever, no matter how hard we try for pleasure or avoid anything uncomfortable. We cannot always have clarity of our lives, nor live in full health every day of it. We also cannot know what it is that is glorious about our lives unless we also know that life includes suffering, loss and difficulty.

Which is why the glory of Jesus on the mountaintop couldn't last, at least while we had God with us as flesh and blood. The very moment Jesus goes down the mountain, he enters Jerusalem for his final days, the final days which we are about to enter into our time in the calendar year we call Lent. The transfiguration of our Lord does indeed tell us who Jesus is, but it does not tell us what Jesus does. In fact, in a brilliant literary device, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew, who was most definitely a faithful Jew, directly connects this Gospel reading in chapter 17 with the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus in chapter 27. Those two chapters are a direct correlation and comparison with each other.

In fact, if you have a Bible in front of you right now, which most of you ought to, and for those who'd like to just look at this a bit now, I invite you now to turn to the Gospel of Matthew. It's the first book in the New Testament. You can share with people in your pew. To find it quickly, don't be afraid to look in the Table of Contents at the front. The Bible is a daunting library of 66 books. It's ok if finding books in the Bible is either new for you or confusing for you. Just forgive yourself right now if you don't open it much. There is always a new start to opening our book of Faith and I'd be happy to give you some help in finding ways to open it. I just encourage you to open the Bible. Now, Chapter 17 of the book of Matthew is short, but chapter 27 is not. You are welcome to use it as a reference for further study after you go home. Pull out your Bible at home and read both chapters.

The chapters are Matthew chapter 17 up and against chapter 27. In chapter 17, the glory of Christ is revealed on a mountaintop, but the hidden glory of God is revealed lifted up on the cross in chapter 27. For you Lutherans who like theology, Luther called this the Theology of Glory vs. the Theology of the Cross. Let's make some comparisons in a little mini bible study:

At the Transfiguration of our Lord from today's Gospel narrative, Jesus takes others up the mountaintop; yet at his crucifixion, Jesus is taken by others to the cross. At the Transfiguration, Jesus is elevated on a mountain, but at his death, he is elevated on a tool of torture.

He received a private epiphany on the mountain top, with only a few disciples to see, but at the cross he is a public spectacle for everyone to see. Jesus is illuminated by light on the mountain top, but at the cross, there is darkness. His garments are like white at the mountain, but at the cross, his garments are stripped off of him.

Jesus is glorified on the mountain, but shamed at the cross. Elijah and Moses appear on the mountain, but no one appears at the cross, and instead of these saints visiting with him, he is visited by criminals one on each side.

At the transfiguration, God reveals and confesses Jesus as Son of God, but at the cross God the Father is silent. And, lastly, on the mountain, the disciples prostrate themselves in awe and worship, but at the cross Jesus is mocked, abandoned and denied.

Slide: Juxtaposition

By looking at the contrast, we receive an understanding. While as the transfiguration is an event that tells us who Jesus is, the Son of God made manifest in the world as God with us, the crucifixion is the event that tells us what God does, which is to free us from sin and death. God descends the mountain to experience the whole of

human possibilities. God stoops down from the mountain top to save us by being lifted up in suffering.

Slide: Cross & Light

This is a God who experiences the depths of pain and anguish that human beings have known and shows that God knows what we all long for: a transfiguration of ourselves. We long for the mountain top, where all that human experience will have meaning and promise.

Yet even at the mountaintop, God shows us that we cannot know what glory feels like, nor taste its fruits, unless we also come down the to know the valleys as well. And, God chose to live that, to die for us, so that we may truly know the glory that Jesus was revealed to have on the mountaintop.

So, the glory is shown on the mountaintop, but the saving event is at the cross. Just knowing that Jesus is God with us isn't enough, but knowing that God chose to suffer for us and save us is.

Slide: Ashes on Forehead

Which leads us to Lent; in fact, the whole reason why we celebrate Transfiguration Sunday right before Ash Wednesday is because the glory that is revealed in Jesus on the mountaintop leads us directly to the saving act of Jesus at the cross. And, that is the journey we take as well. We come down the mountain and stand at the foot of the cross, knowing that we can never save ourselves, and also knowing that the mountaintop experience cannot be forever for us, but is still the promise on the day of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, let us begin our descent down from the mountaintop together to have the ashes of mortality imposed, literally upon our foreheads. This then is where we see the glory of God truly revealed, not in a dazzling display of light and awe, but lifted up on the cross. For at the cross, the love of Christ is fully proclaimed. Amen.