

Transfiguration Sunday, February 23, 2020  
“A Powerful Pit Stop” (Matthew 17:1-9)

This Sunday marks a time of transition for us in the movement of the church year. This is the last Sunday of Epiphany, a season that has shown us who this Babe born in the manger really is and, through him, what God is like. During this season, we have seen him as teacher, healer, fulfiller of the law, and one who called not the righteous, but the sinner. Today, Jesus is revealed as never before as we see his divine nature wondrously displayed. Matthew tells us that he was transfigured before Peter, James and John – the three disciples who were with him, that his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

This, my friends, was more than an exterior sign. It was Jesus’ divinity shining through his humanity. This was for Jesus – as well as the disciples – the assurance that Jesus was the Son of God. It was the confirmation that all Jesus had proclaimed about himself was, in fact, true. To use a racing analogy, the transfiguration was a pit stop for Jesus. His heavenly Father knew the tight race Jesus was running, so he flagged him into the pits right before he began his final lap – his lap to Jerusalem where he would encounter the cross.

And as we end this season of Epiphany and begin the season of Lent on Ash Wednesday, we need this pit stop, too. If we are going to journey with Jesus to the cross, we need the assurance that we are indeed following the Son of God, the One revealed through this mtn. top experience.

Mountains have played an important role throughout God’s history with his people. Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain. Moses received the 10 commandments on a mountain. Elijah heard the still, small voice of God while hiding in a cave on a mountain. The city of Jerusalem was built on a mountain top. And here, Jesus is transfigured on a mountain top.

Mountains are one of God’s most beautiful creations. There is a certain thrill of being up so high and being able to see for miles around the majesty of God’s creation. Perhaps you’ve experienced this yourself: the joy, peace and reverence one feels when up on a mountain, surrounded by all that beauty. It’s almost like being in the presence of God himself, and for that moment, the demands and worries and troubles of life are left behind.

Of course, we don’t have to be on a mountaintop to experience the presence of God. God can and does reveal himself in the routines and rituals of everyday life. You know what I’m talking about: those times when God seems close enough to touch or God’s presence is like a warm blanket wrapped around us. We might call these mountaintop highs. These are gifts from God that give us the strength, the encouragement, the peace of heart and soul we need as we struggle with the brokenness of life in the valleys.

What Jesus and the disciples experienced on the mount of transfiguration gave all of them the encouragement they needed at that time. This was especially true for Jesus as he continued his journey to the cross. Not only did Jesus and the three encounter the physical majesty of God through the beauty of the mountains, but they encountered first hand God’s voice and God’s relationship to human history through the persons of Moses and Elijah.

The presence of these two OT prophets is important for it shows that Jesus is linked with the history of Israel. Their presence was God's effort to tie Jesus tightly with the past and root him firmly in Israel's history. This history lesson on the mountain top was a valuable experience for Jesus and the disciples. It showed Jesus that the plans God began with the call of Abraham were being fulfilled through him. This is what would sustain him as he made that long, hard journey to Calvary. And it reassured the disciples that Jesus was indeed God's Son, the long-awaited redeemer of Israel. This would sustain them, as well, when the going got tough.

Unlike the NASCAR drivers who want to spend as little time in the pit as possible, this pit stop – this mountaintop high – was such a wonderful experience that Peter wanted to build a monument, stay on the mountain, and savor it for a while. He wanted to keep the experience forever. But as he was making his request he was interrupted by the voice of the Father: *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!*

The disciples were so filled with fear and awe that they fell on their faces before the Lord. This was a holy and reverent experience for them and they responded in the only way they knew – through humble worship and praise. Eventually, Jesus came and touched them and told them not to be afraid. When they looked up, it was just the four of them again. Moses and Elijah were gone. Gone, too, was the voice of God. Gone was the white of Jesus clothing and appearance. Gone was their special experience. Everything was back to normal, or as normal as possible after encountering God. Jesus was the only one left, and that's the way it should have been. Yes, Jesus was the fulfillment of the past, but he was pointing to a divine future.

You know, some people, had they been on that mountain, would have seen only Moses. These are the ones who see only the law. They tend view the Bible as a set of rules and regulations, and life as a duty to please God. For them, life is one measuring stick after another by which they are evaluated and scored on who well they have pleased God or others.

Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't try to please God. We should, but it should be done with the right point of reference. We don't try to please God out of a sense of obligation, meaning that we try to accomplish our own righteousness. Nor do we try to earn God's favor so that he will make room for us in heaven. Instead, we please God because of the joy it gives us. We please him by doing godly things – not out of obligation – but as a response for what he has done for us, namely offering us the gift of salvation. This joy comes from being freed of the burden of the law. For when we live under the law, all we see are our sinfulness and shortcomings. When we measure ourselves against the law, we'll never measure up. And that robs the joy from our lives.

As we begin our Lenten pilgrimage this week, we need to remember that the God we walk with to the cross of Calvary is not only the God revealed in the law of Moses, but also the God of mercy who accepts us as we are, with all our shortcomings and sinfulness. This pit stop on the mount of transfiguration where we see the glory of God revealed, and hear the voice of God declare Jesus as his Son, and hear the words *Listen to him* is to move us beyond Mount Sinai to another mountain. It is to move us to the foot of Mount Calvary.

Today we encounter God in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Bread and wine. Body and blood. Grace in the form of earthly elements. We stretch out our empty hands and God fills them. In this encounter, God recalls a history with his people: one marked by love, compassion, and sacrifice. *The body of Christ given for you. The blood of Christ shed for you.* But it also points toward a promised future. It is a foretaste of the feast to come, the feast of victory for our God.

This pit stop – this meal – is a concrete reminder that our God is more than the God who demands perfection through the law. He is the God who fulfills the demands of the law through the life, death and resurrection of his only Son. He is the God who accepts us as we are.

Let us come to the table of mercy. Let us stretch out empty hands to receive his love and be transfigured by that love so that we can go down the mountain and touch others with God's love.