

The Rev. Frank F. Wilson
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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The Last Sunday After the Epiphany, Year "A": Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 2, 2
Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

Title: After the Meeting is over

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.' When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground ...,¹

This is the story. Like all stories it takes place in a moment of time. A dramatic moment to be sure. A moment which we might associate with experiencing an epiphany. A moment in which God's presence, God's glory, the very reality of God was made intensely and dramatically known to the three who were in the company of Jesus that day.

In that moment Peter, James and John were awash in the reality of the divine in all its glory, in all its splendor, in all its warmth... and the disciples did not want it to ever end. And who could blame them?

And so Peter says, "My Lord! Let me build some houses here and we can all stay here, and live here, and never leave this wonderful place; never be absent from this wonderful moment."

That's how we are in a moment of bliss. We want the world to stop. We want it to never end.

Earlier in this season of Epiphany we heard a somewhat similar story. This was a rendering of the day Jesus was baptized. Listen once again to what Matthew had to say about that day: *And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold the heavens were opened.... And lo, a voice from heaven [was heard] saying, "This is my beloved Son, with him I am well pleased."*²

¹ Matthew 17:5-6a

² Matthew 3:16-17

Sounds familiar doesn't it? It should. We just read of God saying of Jesus "This is my beloved. [Listen to him]", only this time we are on a mountain top rather than a river bank.

We encounter this story of the transfiguration here at the end of the season we call Epiphany, but, of course, it is not the end of the story. As we continue journeying with Jesus, at the end we find Jesus dying on a cruel cross and we learn from this same Gospel that at the moment of Jesus' death *the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom....*³ This is an image of a huge curtain being ripped down the middle like one would tear a piece of paper in half. This curtain was that which separated the people from the Holy of Holies -- the Holy of Holies being that room in the Temple where was housed the Ark of the Covenant which tradition has it contained the original stone tablets given to Moses by God, God's Self, and which Moses then brought down from the mountain. And so it was believed that behind this curtain was the place where God was most present. And so it was that only the priest was allowed to enter this particular space, and then only once a year. But now the curtain was now torn in half. The curtain is removed. And now all can see glory for themselves.

In this moment we are dramatically alerted to the reality of God, the reality of God in Christ, and the reality of the invitation to experience God even more intimately than before - in Christ, and with Christ, and through Christ -- Christ being not only the messenger and revealer but no less than the perfect reflection of God, God's self.

And so, an invitation to the mountaintop is an invitation to see, and to hear, and experience God and God's Christ in all fullness, in all the adjacent wonder, and in all its glory. No wonder Peter did not want to leave the mountain top. No wonder he and his friends did not want this moment to ever end.

But dear ones, mountain top experiences are not meant to go on forever. They are meant to be enjoyed. They are meant to inspire. And they are meant to reveal. And they are meant as something of an oasis in the world which is marked by trial and hardship.

That is why we have a season of Lent. Lent is a kind of recognition that we do not always live in a time of epiphany, or great joy, or even wonderful assurance. Life is not and cannot be one long mountain top experience. We do not live on the mountain top, but are called to go down the mountain and do those things God would have us do, and be who God would have us be.

³ Matthew 27:51

Mountain top experiences are not meant to be put in a box, secured with a bow, and stored in a Holy of Holies type closet. They are meant to be moments in time when and where we might hear God's voice saying something akin to, "Get up and be who I have called you to be. Get up and go, and be about those things I have called you to do, and be not afraid."⁴

I believe that when Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper, it was to leave us with a kind of mountain top experience that we could re-visit from time to time, and be healed and refreshed.

"He took bread, blessed and broke it and said, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' And then he took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them saying, 'Drink this all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'⁵

But then having received the most precious body and blood even today we pray, "now send us out to do the work you have given us to do...."⁶

Mountain top experiences are just that. They are exceptions to the ordinary designed to inspire and to prepare us to live the lives God calls us to... and to prepare us for the work he has given us to do.

We might say that the whole experience of worship is intended to be a mountain top experience. But I am reminded of a Methodist gentleman who once visited a Quaker meeting. You might know that a Quaker meeting is stark in its surroundings. No altar. No cross. No stained glass. Just a simple meeting house. To an outsider, a Quaker meeting can appear to be very stark indeed, in both physical accretions as well as in liturgical content. A Quaker meeting is mostly people sitting in silent meditation. And that was indeed the experience of the Methodist visitor that day. A long time sitting in silence. So after a while the Methodist fellow asked the person sitting next to him, "Excuse me, but when does the service begin?" His seat-mate replied, "After the meeting is over."

After the meeting is over. That's when we are invited, challenged indeed, to get up and go out into the world as a citizen of the Kingdom of God, a child of God, inspired by God to love and serve as faithful witnesses to who God calls us to be. Faithful in living the lives God calls us to live – loving God and then loving as God calls each of us to love.

⁴ Matthew 17:7

⁵ Matthew 26:26-28

⁶ BCP, p 366, Post Communion Prayer

Well, you know, though our worship might not look exactly like that of our Quaker friends, the call to love God and to love all that God loves is as true of us as it is for our Quaker friends, and as it is for all who seek God and seek to live in the presence and the light of God.

Church is a kind of invitation you see to, as the Apostle Paul says, “forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead. To press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”⁷

In this mornings’ Gospel we see Christ transfigured. His light shown brightly. So brightly that those who were standing in his presence were awe struck. But the event was not meant to be a spectacle. It was meant to be an invitation. An invitation to us to become transfigured, transformed if you will have it. To become and to be the men and women, boys and girls, the persons God would have us be.

And yes, that includes leaving the mountain top, and going out into the world. But it is a going into the world not alone, but with a kind of knowing that the divine presence is quite real, and quite marvelous, and is greater than anything the world can throw at us... greater even than our own sins.

God calls us to be transformed into images of light, but that also means that Christ calls us to pick up our own cross, and to move into the company of all who have ever loved him and listened to him... and to follow him.⁸

And so we are reminded of all these things as we move into the season of Lent. Thus we are reminding that we indeed carry our own crosses, have our own trials and even crisis’ to face. But at the same time, we are reminded, thank God, that we are not alone. And we are reminded that our help, our strength, and salvation is in the light and that we, as children of the light, are ourselves called to *be* light – to ever be in the process of transforming ourselves into that which God would have us be. And as I have said from this pulpit before, when we all get pretty good at that, when all persons everywhere get pretty good at that, then the Kingdom of God as envisioned by God and as proclaimed by Christ will be realized in full measure.

And so until that day, until that moment in time, O God, whose Christ revealed his glory upon the holy mountain, grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory.⁹ *Amen.*

⁷ Philippians 3:13

⁸ Matthew 16:24

⁹ BCP, p 217, Collect appointed for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany