

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 14, 2021

Lectionary Year B: Mark 9:2-9

As you may have noticed, the "green" seasons of the Church Year -- the Sundays after Epiphany and the Sundays after Pentecost -- both start and end with a bang. This particular season begins with the Epiphany of Our Lord -- recalling the Magi's visit to the infant Jesus -- and concludes with the Transfiguration. For those who believe that the Transfiguration may only be celebrated properly on August 6th, I would urge them to consider the logic of the lectionary texts for the "green" seasons; Epiphany builds up to the mountaintop of the Transfiguration, while Pentecost builds up to Christ's cosmic kingship...one on the final Sunday before Lent, and the other at the conclusion of the Church Year. Plus, it just seems "right" to enjoy something a bit more festive today before the mood shifts in an entirely different direction on Ash Wednesday.

But there is another logic I'd like you to think about regarding this day. As the Transfiguration is quite literally a mountaintop event -- filled with light and wonder -- we consider what it means to be "on top of the mountain." Simply put, we enjoy times like those -- great getaways with the perfect company of family and friends, tournament victories by our favorite sports teams, or that moment in the spotlight when all our hard work finally gets recognized. It feels good to be there...so good, in fact, that we wish it would never end.

Yet there's something in the back of our minds that keeps telling us it can't last forever. Reality eventually sets in and we realize that we have to come back down from the mountain and go about our substantially less glamorous daily lives. But how could we recognize mountaintops were it not for valleys? Actually, those who most fervently crave the sensation of being at the top of the mountain often end up destroying themselves, through the dangers of either addiction or thrill-seeking. Again, some grounding in reality -- boring as it can be sometimes -- is necessary for a reasonably healthy and productive existence.

It was to a mountaintop that Jesus took Peter, James, and John when he revealed his glory to them. And, in their obviously human way, Peter, James, and John really don't seem too excited about coming down from the mountain. Instead, Peter, presumably speaking on behalf of himself and his fellow disciples, exclaims, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Mark 9:5). We get the sense, however, that Peter's exclamation reflects more the weirdness and wonder of the moment than careful consideration. Today's text makes that exceedingly clear; hear this observation: "He did not know what to say, for they were terrified" (9:6).

But -- think about it -- had any of us been in a similar situation, just having seen Jesus turn "dazzling white" from head to toe, we might want to savor it all for more than just a moment. This mountaintop experience was, indeed, something that Peter, James, and John understandably didn't want to end. Yes, they were terrified,

but, one might observe, in a good way.

We also close this season much in the way it began -- with the same words spoken by Jesus' heavenly Father at his baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved..." (9:7b). From this, we can see that this isn't a mountaintop experience for the sake of mountaintop experiences; rather, this is for Peter, James, and John to witness exactly who they've encountered. What, after all, does the voice tell them?

"Listen to him!"

This transfiguration high on that mountain was the right time, one might say, for Peter, James, and John to see who they were dealing with. Jesus, as that voice implied, demanded both their attention and their obedience. And, as they were to find out, the mountaintop experience was to be followed not by more mountaintop experiences, but by great depths of rejection and human suffering. While it is good to be "here" today, celebrating our Lord revealed in the same glory as the greats -- Moses and Elijah -- we, like Peter, James, and John, cannot remain "here" forever.

But we know where things are going; the disciples didn't. We know that Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and Easter are right ahead of us. the disciples? Well, they wouldn't have had the luxury of the liturgical year to present the story to them so neatly. Actually, Jesus struggled to convey even the most rudimentary concepts to them, first and foremost that he would undergo great suffering, be put to death, and rise on the third day. Note the words with which today's text closes: "He ordered [Peter, James, and John] to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had

risen from the dead" (9:9b). All of the events of Jesus' earthly life were to be properly understood only in light of his death and resurrection. Thus, the point of a story of Jesus Christ cannot come exclusively through the Transfiguration, through his miracles, or through his preaching. Obviously, with neither a Good Friday nor an Easter at this point, the disciples cannot possibly know what is central to the story.

Just as history cannot be properly understood when it's being made, so too are history's participants unaware of where it's going. Were we in the shoes of Peter, James, and John, we would've arrived on that mountaintop, seen Jesus' transfiguration, and very likely assumed that this was the pinnacle to which everything was headed.

You can hardly blame them...

But then, the voice says, "Listen to him!" Listen and find out where we're headed...more importantly, listen and follow the Lord to the real pinnacle of our destiny. That pinnacle is the cross -- seemingly the opposite of the radiant, shining glory of the Transfiguration. Yes, we do, indeed, come down from the mountaintop, but not to a disappointment; salvation is anything but a disappointment!

It took the disciples a bit longer to see where it was all headed, but we don't have that problem. We needn't constantly wish for the exhilaration of the mountaintop with the fear of the despair of the valley, because Jesus has revealed himself most profoundly in the lowest of places...among the suffering, with the poor and outcast, and on the cross.

And of this Jesus, our heavenly Father says, "Listen to him!" Listen to Jesus, whose glory is revealed not only on a mountaintop, but also on a cross and with a crown of thorns. Through these seemingly disparate but equally effective means, we know someone who, yes, demands our attention and our obedience, but, in addition to that, offers us his very presence -- in word, in deed, and today at the Holy Table. Listen to him. Listen, in particular, for what he has to say to you. It may not lead you to a mountaintop. In fact, it may lead you to great depths -- of compassion and humble service -- and, not entirely coincidentally, to a more intense experience of salvation itself.

Had the disciples not come down from the mountaintop, their witness to Jesus Christ would've been severely compromised, to say the least. A voice that tells us to listen to Jesus is one that calls us to share that salvation that has been given to us. We cannot stay on the mountaintop forever, either, but, like the disciples, we have Jesus' presence both on the highest heights and in the deepest depths. There are people who need what we have to share, and, more importantly, people who hunger for it. Let's come down from the mountaintop and be with God's people wherever they might be -- hungry, thirsty, unwelcome, unclothed, sick, imprisoned. Christ's "transfiguring" presence makes just as much of a difference in those lives as it does on mountaintops.

Maybe even more...

Amen.