

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Later today the culmination of the NFL season will take place and one team will victoriously emerge from the league championship game as the best team in the NFL. Later this summer the Olympic and Paralympic Games will be taking place in Paris France. In either event, I have always appreciated the endurance of the human spirit in respectable competition and tried to imagine the thrill any athlete must experience standing triumphantly in the highest level of the sport of football or on any level of the medal podium. This truly must be the thrill of victory, as Jim McKay would be heard saying at the opening of the old Saturday afternoon TV show, Wide World of Sports. For most competitors of any sport, I guess this would be the pinnacle of their quest as athletes, this is what they work so hard for and dream about, this is what we now call *their* “mountaintop experience.”

Today in our worship, we mark the end of our Epiphany season with our liturgical mountaintop experience. During the last five weeks of the Epiphanytide our worship and the appointed lessons have made known to us and have even shown us the revelation of our Lord. So here we are today at the very climax of the of the Epiphany season with this celebration of this mountaintop experience we come to know as Transfiguration Sunday. Today we celebrate the glorious revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Christ's manifestation as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets upon this mountain. Up to this point in our liturgical year this is really the first time we see Jesus as we have never seen him before. However, after today we come down from the dazzling glory on the mountain and we move away from the light of that revelation and begin our journey to the cross with our forty days of penitential discernment and reflection as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter during the forty days of Lent.

And we know that Lent begins this Wednesday with our participation in our Ash Wednesday liturgy and that journey ends at sundown on Holy Thursday. And while it is not mentioned in our Gospel lesson today, we know that as Jesus, Peter, James, and John come down off the mountain they are confronted with a disgruntled crowd...a very stark contrast to the glory they just experienced atop the mountain. And after today we too leave the glory of Epiphany and the Mount of Transfiguration and head into the harsh reality of the wilderness of Lent...so much for the mountaintop experience. But is this the only place or the only time during our liturgical year that we experience the glory of this mountaintop experience?

By definition, this phrase “mountaintop experience” has come to mean a moment of significant revelation given by God, or a time of feeling especially close to God, or perhaps, like the disciples today within our Gospel lesson, an experience of seeing Jesus as never before. I mention all of this because I think that this expression has moved beyond a significant revelation given by God. We seem to have come to exclusively associate God with a heightened significant moment in our lives...such as a big victory, an Olympic moment, or anything momentous within our lives. Sadly though, we have come to believe any significant revelation of God can only happen when our glory is lifted up or something glorious has happened and we benefit from it. In this, we believe that the revelation of God is exclusively seen in our mountaintop experiences within our glorious events. But, is this so called “mountaintop experience” the only way we can experience God? This then begs the question, is God only experienced when we ourselves are elevated spiritually, mentally, and even physically?

Mountains have always had a significant role in God's dealings with His people, which have led to the expression "mountain-top experience." This expression has originated from such passages like we have before us today in our Gospel lesson as well as other passages from the Bible because of the dealings God had with His people on various "mountain-tops." So, the phrase has come to mean a moment of transcendence – or epiphany; and in particular, an experience of significant revelation given by God...but is God only realized in that moment of heightened glory? Where then, is God *after* the big game, *after* the big play, or *after* the medal ceremony...is God realized as we come down from the various mountains of glorious achievement?

God is most certainly with us but do we realize God in the darkness of our lives or are too busy only looking upward for the heightened dazzling glory? St. Paul calls this to mind today:

⁵ For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor 4:5-6)

Yes, God is in the lowly darkened times but do we notice or are we blinded by our own glory? Do we suppose or suspect God is not with us or God is punishing us because we are not experiencing glory and praise as we like it...aimed at ourselves. In the familiar prayer of Saint Richard of Chichester, we pray:

Thanks be to thee, my Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits thou hast given me,
for all the pains and insults thou hast borne for me.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know thee more clearly,
love thee more dearly,
and follow thee more nearly, day by day. Amen.

We give thanks for all the benefits our Lord has given us and we want to know God more clearly so we can love God more dearly and follow more nearly but can we only do this when it is befitting to us, or can we only really follow more nearly and love more dearly when we can see it, articulate it, and approve it and are glorified in it? Have we forgotten that:

⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

As we hear this morning, God's love for us is made known to us in Jesus Christ on this mountaintop...but that revealed love today on this mountain comes down from that mountain to us and journeys to the cross and dies for us...and each of us like Peter, James, and John can merely sit in awe of this love's benefits for us...and this mountaintop experience happens anywhere at any time and most especially when we least expect it...in the most simplest and humblest of ways. We don't altar God's love, we merely receive it from God through the one being revealed to us.

In First Kings we hear that Elijah challenged the false prophets of Baal and out of fear for his life

he flees to the solitude under a broom tree where he asks the Lord to take his life. Think of the darkness of this moment...certainly a moment we would NOT refer to as a mountaintop experience...but it is...and it becomes one for Elijah. God hears Elijah, knows what is happening with Elijah. As a result, Elijah is told by the angels to travel forty days and forty nights to a cave in Horeb the Mount of God. As Elijah stood before the Lord, of course the Lord demonstrated His power but take notice how we hear the Lord's voice in First Kings...it is written:

And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; ¹²and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. ¹³And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (1Kings 19:11b-13a)

God's voice is a still small voice in the King James translation. It is also referred to as a "gentle whisper" in other translations and within the translation we use in worship it is the "sound of sheer silence." When I looked at the Hebrew it parsed out as a small whisper...either way, against the powerfully loud boisterous contrast of strong winds, an earthquake, and breaking mountains comes the very voice of God in a quiet small mountaintop whispering experience. Its not a big splendid production, its not some miraculous act that astounds us, it's a simple whisper that reveals God, a small voice that becomes the mountaintop experience for Elijah.

Today, once again, God speaks NOT in some grand voice, not atop some glorious mountain, NOT in some magnificently majestic action, rather God speaks in a small voice and says to us within the words of this Gospel lesson,

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7b)

As we listen to this Transfiguration account, may we hear that Jesus is not alone on this mountain...he did not go up there by himself, he takes others with him, Peter, James, and John in order to empower, encourage, and engage their faith as well as ours. This however does NOT make them or us king of the mountain...rather it sends us down the mountain to tell others and to share with others the glory of Jesus Christ...we do not nor can we even remain silent because for us he has risen, he has risen indeed and the reality of our worship of Him is our service to Him and others.

Today, at the very start of our Gospel we hear that after six days Jesus and his three disciples ascend the Mount of Transfiguration. After six days, according to the Book of Genesis, God rested and for this reason the seventh day is Shabbat, a day of rest or what we know as the Sabbath. Today is our Sabbath and we have gathered to experience God once again. In this gathering the glory of God is transfigured and lifted up before us, NOT in a dazzling white robe, but in a simple loaf of bread and cup of wine. By our faith in this simple Word our entire notion of glory is transformed and by it we are transfigured, by this Word who is Jesus Christ. Today Wyatt and Ian Henry will experience this Word a bit differently for the first time as that Word that is Jesus Christ becomes for them a taste of glory in their first Eucharist.

In this Word and Sacrament lifted before us today we all learn that we are NOT perishing we are transfigured...this is the GOOD NEWS...it is our great victory in the big game, it is our gold medal, it is our mountaintop experience right now! But we are NOT high atop a mountain, there are no bells and whistles, no dazzling white robes, just a Word, just a simple piece of bread and a quiet sip of wine that sends us out into the chaos to be the healing grace that transfigures others we encounter in our service to God.

No matter how we choose to understand or to view God, I pray as Jesus does that you all may see the dazzling glory of God in the grace and forgiveness we are freely given out of Gods love for us, made known to us, not just in the grand and magnificent events and occurrences around us, but in the very simple, somewhat darkened, and somewhat hidden realities of our lives as we head out upon our journey through Lent to the various crosses we will encounter...God is with us...to the end of the ages

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.