

Today we climb the holy mountain to its top. Together we traverse the incline in the silence of prayer. And there, at the top, is the story of the glory of God, no longer hidden by the flesh of our Galilean conqueror, but shining through his face, his body, even his clothes. And there are Moses and Elijah at the top of the mountain, and they converse. And there are Peter, James, and John, drowsy onlookers and holy evesdroppers. And there is the Voice at the top of the mountain. This is my Son. This is my glory. Listen to him and never forget what he says.

Look around today. Something is different. It's the middle of summer and we are celebrating Transfiguration. Some of you, being honest, have told me recently that you didn't know that this was a feast day, and certainly not in August. Many said they knew the story of the disciples and Jesus and the prophets and the great Voice, but they knew nothing of all of this as a celebration of its own.

There are many good reasons for not knowing, the best of which is that we usually read this gospel the Sunday before Lent begins. The last Sunday after Epiphany,

usually somewhere around the middle of February, acts as a turnstile that moves us from Epiphany to Easter. The stars and shepherds behind us, the cross and grave before us, it is there that we change course. And that is how we have come to hear this gospel, as a gentle warning, as a friendly reminder that Lent is almost here, and we are given a vision of Christ's glory to sustain us all the way until Easter. So if that is how you identify with this gospel reading you're in good company.

But of course, that isn't true today. It's summer and most of Boston is at the Cape, and I have asked you to come and to sing like it is Easter or Christmas. Transfiguration, even in summer, ought to be celebrated. Much of this started with Origen, the saint and scholar who lived in the second and third centuries. He was fascinated with Christ's Transfiguration and how God's glory rested in him. Origen was the first to suggest that the glory that showed on the holy mountain was the same as the glory revealed in the Resurrection, and if we celebrate Easter because it showed this glory, then we ought to celebrate the Transfiguration, too. So it became a Feast.

The date, the middle of summer, has less to do with theology and more to do with weather. People liked to mark Transfiguration with processions up mountains, Eucharists in mountaintop chapels. Summer, of course, was the time for this. Thus August 6<sup>th</sup> came to be the date and this the mountaintop feast.

The way that all of the gospel writers describe it, there is good reason to believe that it probably happened directly before the death and resurrection of Jesus, and it seems that Origen was correct in linking the mystery of the Transfiguration with the wonderful mystery of the Empty Tomb. But today the link is different. There is no Christmas and Epiphany to put behind us, no Lent and Easter ahead; it is God's glory in the middle of times more ordinary. *But perhaps therein lies the mystery!*

Think about what Ordinary Time has looked like here. There were youth on pilgrimage to England. There have been parables about mustard seeds and good seeds and scattered seeds and different kinds of soil. We have been

awash with strange OT stories about Abraham and his wandering ways and the things he did trying to follow God. We have been following Jacob—tricky Jacob, bad boy Jacob—whose life of faith sometimes seems more like an episode of dramatic television than it does biblical value. He outwitted his brother, he tricked his father, he stole the birthright, he had to get out of town to avoid getting killed. And just before he accidentally married two sisters, he had a dream and saw angels ascending and descending and heard the Voice—that same voice, I guess—introduced itself and promised to be with him.

That's the story of Ordinary Time, isn't it? It's August and it's hot and most people are at the Cape—but in the middle of it all, in a quiet moment of prayer, God shows up again. And there are Moses and Elijah, and they are talking about Christ's departure. And there is the cloud of smoke and the Voice. In the most unexpected of places.

But it's true. Sometimes the divine Mystery shows up in expected places like Christmas and Easter, and that is worth celebrating. But sometimes God shows up in

unexpected places. On the mountain in the middle of summer, in places we figured God probably didn't bother to go. And we struggle to listen in and make sense of it like Peter and James and John. And we try to do what the Voice says, to listen, and not to forget a word. And we carry it with us. Sometimes, like them, we just don't know how to describe it, how to make it makes sense. So we just don't say anything. We keep quiet. ///

I remember when it was time for me to ask Alison to marry me. I had the ring and I had the proposal planned out. I made the trip to see her parents to ask for her hand in marriage. I was nervous. I went in to All Saints, the Episcopal Church across from the Coca-Cola Building in Atlanta, and I just wanted to pray. There was nobody there, so I went up to the altar and knelt. It occurred to me that I had gone two hours down I-75 on a motorcycle to ask her parents officially, even though when I got there they told me it was unnecessary—but I hadn't asked God officially. So I knelt and I asked. And the answer was more powerful than I knew to expect. It overwhelmed me. And the sexton, just doing his job,

thought I was on drugs and he told me to leave, and I didn't know what to say. I haven't told many people about that. The whole experience was embarrassing.

I remember when we found out we were going to have Ella. We had started wondering if we would ever have children. It was August and it was hot, but we had the test and it was positive. On opposite ends of the phone, we didn't say much. We cried a little and kept saying really? Really? And we couldn't say anything to anyone.

They say of William Wordsworth that he had such a love affair with Nature that sometimes it overwhelmed him. And sometimes it overwhelmed those around him. In the mountains. At the beach. At sunset. He had to learn not to say anything. He learned to distract himself, counting rocks and counting trees. What was he doing? It was all too wonderful for him, and he was trying to keep quiet.

When Toscanini finished sixty rehearsals of Bellini's *Norma*, at the dress rehearsal, he put down his baton and announced that the concert was canceled, he couldn't go

on. Why? “The music is too great,” he said. “It’s beyond human powers. I cannot do it.” We know what he meant

Two years ago, Alison and I were at Salisbury Cathedral. And during Evensong, I prayed that God would help me know when it was time to move on. We had wonderful years at St. Patrick’s, but I thought the moving on was soon. And after Evensong, as we stood outside the marvelous Cathedral, I sensed God telling me it was time. It was okay. But of course I didn’t know yet about Good Shepherd and I was afraid to tell anyone. And then last month, I was there with our youth. And I told them how much I love Salisbury. And how for Episcopalians it is a holy and sacred place. And I asked them if we could stop and pray for a minute where I once sensed God dwell with me, and how I sensed there God telling me it was okay to move on. But I didn’t say anything to them about that. How could I? It is always too wonderful for words.

God’s glory shows up in the midst of ordinary life, and it leaves us overwhelmed and silenced, and that ought to be celebrated!

As I looked more carefully at our gospel today, one of the things that caught my attention was the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. Luke says they were talking about his departure, which he would accomplish in Jerusalem. That is what our translation says, though the King James Version says they were talking about his death. I wondered which it was so I looked in my Greek New Testament, and the answer was more wonderful. It says they were talking about his Exodus. That is the Greek word: Exodus. Jesus was talking to Moses about his own crossing over, his own Exodus. There in the cloud, Jesus has finally come to understand and embody the reality that God’s glory will lead him, not from life to death, but from death to life. And he will lead others out of sin and death into life. That will be his passing over. That will be his Exodus. And life will never be the same! the disciples heard this wonderful thing, but they didn’t know what to say. They were silent and told no one.

Except of course finally they couldn't hold back. One example of this comes in II Peter. II Peter even uses the same word: Exodus. It is how Peter has come to think of the end of his life. And I wondered if that was typical, if that it was common. So I looked up the word Exodus in the New Testament. It only occurs three times. Not many. Two out of three occur in our readings today. That is what Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah about: his Exodus. And so many years later, when Peter comes to think of his own death, he uses that same word.

So my theory is that this is no accident. In an unexpected moment for Peter, he was praying and the glory of God showed up and Christ was transfigured, and he heard Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah about his Exodus. And it was all so wonderful that he couldn't find the words. So for years he was left with silence.

But in the end, Peter's life had been so transformed and transfigured by that same glory, he wrote to friends in words of final celebration. He had heard the Voice on the mountain and it had changed his life forever. As it said,

he had listened. He remembered the word. He was silent about it no more. He took one final chance to celebrate and give thanks before it was time for him to pass over.