

The Shared Ministries of St. Mark's & Holy Spirit
The Last Sunday after Epiphany **7 February 2016**

Sometimes I wish that the Church universal would change the date of Easter – away from lunar calendars and variable dates. The way the Church determines the date of Easter goes back to the Last Supper. Jesus and his disciples were in Jerusalem for the Passover, and the Jewish holiday was always held fourteen days after the vernal (or Spring) equinox. The Council of Nicea in AD 325 decided that the official date of Easter should be the first Sunday after that paschal full moon. Unfortunately, full moons vary each year, and so Easter can be as early as March 22nd or as late as April 25th. To make things even more complicated, when the world changed from the Julian calendar in 1582 to the Geogorian calendar, the Orthodox Church stayed with the Julian, and so their Easter is rarely on the same date as ours.

I bring this up because this year, with an early Easter on March 27th, we have a much condensed season of Epiphany. And thus it seems like we've barely finished celebrating Christ's baptism, when we now move into the more somber season of Lent, leading up to Holy Week. But no matter how many Sundays there are in Epiphany, the last Sunday always commemorates the moment when Jesus turns his face toward Jerusalem following the event that we refer to as the Transfiguration.

Just eight days before, Jesus had asked his followers two questions. The first and easiest was "*Who do people say that I am?*" Then followed the more significant question, "*But who do YOU say that I am?*" And when Peter responded, "*You are the Christ, the Messiah, of God,*" Jesus immediately told them where that truth would lead: to wholesale rejection and probable death, not just for Jesus, but possibly for anyone who would follow him. But, of course, the followers of Jesus don't understand.

Luke says that eight days after that encounter, Jesus takes time out for a retreat, and he leads his three closest associates up a mountain to pray. They go off for a quiet time, a brief period away from the distractions of his daily work. It seems clear to me that Jesus was not intending to prove anything to the three. In fact, he probably didn't expect what happened anymore that the disciples who were just about to settle down for a brief nap following the strenuous climb. No, what Jesus most likely felt at that moment was the sense of being utterly alone. The prospect of his death had begun to stare him straight in the face, but even among his closest friends, there was no one with whom he could speak, no one who fully understood what was to come.

Jesus is praying, no doubt about where his journey would lead, and in his prayer he becomes suffused with an intense radiance, so bright that even his clothes glistened. Suddenly, he is flanked by Moses and Elijah, the great symbols of the Law and the Prophets, emblematic of all that had authority in the Jewish faith, and two men who had also experienced "mountain top" moments.

Of all the gospel accounts of this moment with these heroes of Israel, only Luke tells us the contents of their conversation, saying that they spoke "*of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.*" The topic of their time with Jesus was death, Jesus' death. Yet they didn't speak of it as something that would happen to him. Instead the spoke of his "*departure,*" [That's our translation. The word Luke actually used was his "*exodus.*"] They spoke of the new exodus that Jesus would accomplish. Jesus' exodus, like that of Moses, was about to set God's people free, not free from the bondage of a political emperor, but free from their bondage to sin and the fear of death. But once again, the disciples don't understand.

They are fully awake now, not missing a thing, but not necessarily comprehending it. They see Jesus' appearance transfigured by light. But it is not a light shining upon him. Instead, this dazzling illumination comes from within. And perhaps for the first time, these followers could see what had always been there, the "holiness of this man shining through his humanness," (Frederick Buechner) what the Gospel of John called the light of the world, which not everyone would recognize.

Peter, not comprehending, but wanting to do something, suggests that they to freeze-dry this occasion by setting up three tents, three chapels, one each for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. But immediately the cloud, the symbol of God's presence, overshadowed them, and they hear the words spoken only to Jesus at his baptism, "*my son, the beloved, my chosen.*" And then comes the key message in all of this: "*Listen to **him**.*" *Listen to him.*

In the biblical verses just before the Transfiguration, it is clear that these followers were having an difficult time understanding when Jesus spoke of his coming rejection, death and resurrection. And they also did not understand when he added that if any would truly follow, they, too, must take up their crosses. No wonder Luke concludes this account by saying that the three disciples "*kept silent, and in those day told no one any of the things they had seen.*" And no wonder they would have preferred staying there on the mountain, running a retreat house for people wishing to get away from the difficulties of everyday life. But Jesus will have none of that, and he leads them down again to the plain and all the problems of the world.

There is a hymn in the hymnal of the Anglican Church of Australia that commemorates the Transfiguration and attempts to describe the thoughts going through the minds of Peter, James and John on that holy mountain. Each verse extols the virtues of the mountain top and has the refrain, "*How good, Lord, to be here.*" But then comes the final verse that distains the choice of making "*this hill our home,*" and instead says,

*"How good, Lord, to be here!
Yet we may not remain;
But since you bid us leave the mount,
Come with us to the plain."*

The Epiphany season ends with this mountain top experience. What really happened there? What was it? It was a vision, a moment of sensing the truth about who this Jesus really is. It was a vision that Paul thought should be lived out by building special chapels, a wonderful high place where people could get away from the real world.

It has become commonplace these days for institutions, including churches, to write vision statements. Such statements are usually filled with high and lofty goals. But vision statements will only mean something if they lead people to action, if they lead as Jesus led, down again to the real world, to the arena where we are called to address the realities of human life with all its suffering and pain. Peter, and I imagine the others, would have loved to stay on the mountain, maintaining worship centers there. But that is **not** where we are meant to live. And likewise, our church buildings, our worship centers, whether here or in Ashland, are not to be worshipped for themselves, but rather places where our worship leads us to action in our daily lives.

As we conclude this Epiphany season with its dawning understanding of who Jesus is for us and now move into Lent, let us begin once more to ask with those first disciples, where following him might lead as we invite him to come with us down from the mountain top. For in our Lenten observance, we, too, each of us, are called to turn our faces to Jerusalem, not literally, but figuratively, and to walk our own paths of self-giving love amid the pain and suffering down on the plane that is the world in which we live.

I once read a missionary's translation of the thirteen chapter of First Corinthians, which was our Epistle reading last Sunday. His version begins: "If I have the language ever so perfectly - and speak like a native - and have not Christ's love for them, I am nothing. If I have diplomas and degrees - and know all the up-to-date methods - and have not Christ's touch of understanding love, I am nothing. If I am able to argue successfully against any - and yet have not Christ's wooing note, I am nothing. If I have all faith and great ideals and magnificent plans - and have not Christ's love that sweats and bleeds that prays and bleeds, I am nothing. If I give my clothes and money **to** them - and have not His love **for** them, I am nothing. If I can heal all manner of sickness and disease - but wound hearts and hurt feelings for want of His love, I am nothing."

With Ash Wednesday this week, you and I are called once again to begin our journey through Lent, seeking to know and to emulate the love of God that is so freely offered to us and through us to the world around us. For some, that journey will involve a discipline of giving up something or, preferably, taking on something. But whatever that might be for you, I would counsel us not to think of our making choices because of some discipline that makes demands on us, but rather as the result of our exercising our freedom to follow Christ in his way of living in relationship to others.

There once was a new headmaster, who arrived at a traditional, all-boys school in England. The headmaster who preceded him had been a terror, a tyrant. The new headmaster, whose name was Arnold, on the very first day, called the boys together and told them that from now on there was going to be much more liberty and much less flogging. "You are free," he said, "but you are responsible. I intend to leave you much to yourselves and put you upon your honor, because I believe that if you are guarded and watched and spied upon - you will grow up knowing only the fruits of fear. And when your liberty is finally given you, as it must some day, you will not know how to use it."

The boys found that difficult to believe, and being boys, they continued to break the rules. When confronted with what they had done wrong, they continued to make excuses for themselves, usually telling lies. But each time he heard those lies, Headmaster Arnold would say to them, "if you say so, it must be true. I believe your word." It wasn't all that long before the atmosphere at that school changed, and it became commonly said, "It's a shame to tell Arnold a lie; he always believes you." Well, he did not believe them. No, he believed in them, and as a result, he made them what he believed them to be.

As we begin to journey in Lent towards Holy Week, let us remember that the Christian pilgrimage is not a way **around** the troubles of this world, but rather the path **through** them. And as we journey with a Lord who believes **in us**, we will be able to **be** what he believes us to be. For the one who is **with** us and **for** us, is our way, our truth and our life. Amen.