

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

We've come to the close of the season of Epiphany and all through this season, we have been experiencing the revelation and the recognition of the true identity of Jesus. The revelation of the nature and character of God has been made in the person of Jesus Christ. It began with the appearance of the Magi who knew who they were looking for and followed the light of the bright star in order to find him. When they arrived at the location of the baby, Jesus, they recognized him as the Messiah.....the savior of the chosen people of Israel.....the savior, in fact, of the whole world. This little baby, Jesus, would be the one who would usher into the world the kingdom of God.....and they knew It.

We watched as he called his first disciples and we listened to the lessons Jesus gave his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus described the nature of that kingdom that he was revealing to the world. Jesus told us who the blessed people were and it was quite the opposite of the prevailing wisdom among men at the time. Throughout this season, we have listened to Jesus tell us not only what the kingdom of God looks like, but his instructions to us in how we were to behave in order to usher in that kingdom. He charged us with being the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And he challenged us to go beyond the letter of the law to capture the spirit behind it and to behave accordingly. And he taught us how to love as he loves and as our Father in heaven loves us.....our enemies as well as our friends.

And now, on the Feast of the Transfiguration, we are startled by a story that reveals even more clearly exactly who Jesus is. In case we've missed it, this mountain top experience makes it perfectly clear. Jesus is the Son of God as God announces to those present just as God's voice did at the baptism of Jesus which was the first story we heard during this Epiphany season. A voice boomed out from the bright cloud that descended: "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." The identification and the instruction could not be any clearer. These are almost the same words that God spoke at Jesus' baptism.....with the addition of the phrase: "Listen to him."

Imagine, if you can, what it must have been like for Peter and James and John to be witness to this earth-shattering event. At Jesus' request, they have gone with him to the top of the mountain

not knowing what to expect. Before they realize what's going on.....and while Jesus is praying.....Jesus is transformed right before their very eyes. He 'lights up' in a way that makes him luminescent. His face shone in an other-worldly fashion as if he had been lit by an enormously strong light from within. His clothing becomes dazzling white. And he is joined in conversation by Moses and Elijah. How could any sensible and completely human person make any sense at all out of what they were seeing? The sight defied any rational explanation. The disciples did not hear the conversation among those three.....Jesus and Moses and Elijah.....and they could not possibly have realized at that moment that what they were seeing was a preview of what lay ahead for Jesus. The transfiguration marks a halfway point in Jesus' journey which was beyond the customary experience of mere mortals. Each experience in its own way defied explanation, but for the disciples witnessing the transfiguration, nothing internalizes information more profoundly than our own personal experience. We cannot deny or dismiss what we have experienced and seen and heard and neither could Peter and James and John. As much as what they had seen defied explanation, they knew what they had seen and they knew what they had experienced.....and it was beyond anything that had ever happened to them before.

Just six days earlier, Jesus had posed a question to his disciples when there were rumors circulating that Jesus was John the Baptist returned from the dead. Jesus wants to know who *they* think he is. Peter is the one who steps forward and identifies Jesus as the Messiah.....the one who is to come to save the chosen people of Israel. Peter recognizes Jesus for who he is. But Jesus goes on to tell him that what lies ahead for Jesus is an arrest, a trial, and the merciless death on the cross. Peter is frantic to prevent such a thing from happening. He tries to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem. This can't happen!! It must not happen! And Jesus rebukes him for trying to tempt him into avoiding the culmination of the mission for which Jesus has been sent to earth in the first place.

This transfiguration of Jesus provides sanction for the tough teachings that Jesus has shared with the disciples. Just as Jesus would have to follow the way of death on the cross, those who follow him will be required to bear their own crosses.....perhaps every day of their lives. The transfiguration of Jesus is a preview of the glory that is to come beyond the cross, but it cannot happen without the cross. Jesus is demonstrating for his followers the necessity of being faithful in tough circumstances. When called to do so, we can't duck the crucial issues of our day and expect that we will reap the rewards of having been faithful. If ever we are forced to make a choice, we must choose Jesus and his teachings. The transfiguration is the promise of what will come. It is the assurance that Jesus will see it through and that no matter what, Jesus will see us through as well. Jesus will not abandon us which is what the cross proves. The glory comes after the cross, not before. And without the cross, there is no glory. Without the denial of self, there is no glory. Without the obedience to God, there is no glory.

After God speaks from the cloud that has descended on top of the mountain, Elijah and Moses disappear. Jesus is left standing alone and the luminescence that has just transfigured him departs as well. Jesus turns to his disciples who are still staring in disbelief and are frozen in place. He reaches out to them and touches them and tells them not to be afraid. What they have just experienced must have been as terrifying as it was bewildering. He tells them not to mention what they have just experienced to anyone until after he has died and has been raised from the dead. There may have been no temptation to share this experience with anyone. Who would believe them anyway?

As they start their way back down the mountain, they descend from the mountaintop to the ordinary life of ordinary men. It's a life fraught with danger and political intrigue. It is a life in which Jesus will comply with God's mission for him and will appear to have been lost forever on the cross until God raises him from the dead three days later.

The lesson for all of us is that Jesus is with us.....no matter what.....and always. And that God is present and working His will in the world even in the darkest of moments. We have only to remain faithful, to take up our own cross, to fulfill our own mission and to trust in the unfailing and undying love of God through Christ Jesus. God showed us the glory that awaits in the transfiguration of Jesus at the top of the mountain.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.