

Transformed by the Transfigured Jesus

On this Transfiguration Sunday, my Scripture text is Matthew 17:1-8. Jesus had reached a milestone with his disciples on his retreat with them in Caesarea Philippi, where Simon Peter confessed him as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (16:16). Jesus then began to explain the kind of messiah he was, a suffering servant who would be rejected and crucified. The disciples would also have their crosses to bear in following him. Jesus took Peter, James and John with him to the top of a mountain, where they were permitted to see a partial unveiling of the glory of the eternal Son of God.

On this day, when the world seems to be in such distress and the challenges before the Christian world seem so great, I believe we could use a mountaintop worship experience.

Follow as I read Matthew 17:1-8

17 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

The term "mountaintop experience" is used to designate a special encounter with God that inspires us to greater faith. Although the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ was an unrepeatable revelation of his glory to a select inner core of disciples, this "mountaintop" experience no doubt prepared Jesus for the coming days of his journey to his cross. And Peter, James, and John never forgot this experience. Both John, in his gospel (John 1:14) and Peter, in his second letter (2 Peter 1:16-18) refer to this event, which apparently impacted their lives. It no doubt changed them.

How privileged were these three beloved disciples to be invited to this worship experience! Yet we as Jesus' followers today are also invited to a mountaintop experience, whereby we may see more of his person and experience more of his presence and power within us. More than ever, we need him to change us.

We who belong to Jesus know we didn't seek God. He sought us, even when we were running from him. We were like the woman at the well, whom Jesus found

and invited to become a worshiper “In spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23). Just like Peter, James, and John, you and I were chosen by God to become his worshipers. We’re all invited to worship God, corporately in this sanctuary, or whoever and wherever we may be. May in our minds these words be over the entrances, *“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come!’”* (Rev. 22:17). We were invited when we were outsiders. Now as part of the Bride and led by the Spirit we say, “Come!”

God invites us to worship with each other, as Peter, James and John were bound together to share this worship experience. The Book of Hebrews speaks to this element of worship: *“²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching”* (10: 24-25).

We can only imagine the wonderment in the minds of Peter, James and John as the Lord led them to the top of the mountain! What would be in store for them? And, so it should be also with us. There ought to be a sense of expectancy that we have come to meet God as we hear the musical prelude and enter the sanctuary. May we come here to meet one another, but primarily to meet with God and to be with Jesus, who promises to be with us (Matt. 18:20)

The place of the Transfiguration was “a high mountain” (1). Bible scholars conjecture that this mountain is Mt. Meron, which is the highest in Israel at 3,926 feet, and one that would have been on their route from Caesarea Philippi. Not high in comparison with the Himalayas, certainly. It wasn’t a very notable place. What made it “high” was the experience of worship with Jesus.

This is a very lovely and wonderful worship center, but you can find bigger and more elaborate, expensive and expansive ones right here in our city. What will make this a very high and holy place will be the presence of Jesus and his meeting with us. That will make this “mountain” higher and more majestic than Everest. Jesus will make this worship center grander than St. Paul’s or St. Peter’s Cathedrals. “Sanctuary” means “holy place,” where we see Jesus.

When I was a young preacher, I was invited to be the guest preacher in a church that had a quote from John’s Gospel (12:21) printed on the pulpit, in the hope that the preacher would read it before giving the sermon. The quote was the request of some Greeks to Philip: *“Sir, we would see Jesus.”* The message to me was this church was expecting my sermon to help them see Jesus, i.e. to see and hear his message and person more clearly.

Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James, and John. His resplendent glory, which he had with the Father from all eternity, shone through. These disciples were allowed to see a glimpse of his resurrection glory that would be his when he

ascended back into heaven, and a foretaste of the glory that will be his when he returns to earth on the clouds.

Jesus, in this time of heavenly worship, was visited by two of the greatest Old Testament personalities, Moses and Elijah. Their presence showed that Jesus is greater than Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet and forerunner of the Messiah. These two represent the presence of all of God's people who are now with him in Paradise. But these worshipers, Peter, James, and John, realized that Jesus alone, not these Old Testament greats, is worthy of worship. He's the one we've come to see and to hear.

Peter, who often talked even when he had nothing to say, uttered something about building three dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. In seminary, we would have said Peter was talking like some church growth people, who had an 'edifice complex,' obsessed with building church buildings. But the voice from heaven said they were to focus on the Son and listen to him! True worship doesn't depend on buildings, but is to see Jesus by hearing the words of God, who can meet us anywhere. Some of my most transforming worship experiences were not in church sanctuaries. The climax of worship was after Moses and Elijah left and the cloud disappeared and they saw no one except Jesus (8). God's voice told them to listen to him!

We listen to Jesus in worship as we hear his word read and preached. The word reveals our sinfulness; makes known to us the love of God and the Savior's death for our sins. The word reveals all we need to know about God, ourselves, and our hope for eternal life. We can find the same hope in the word. Worship is a meeting with God that prepares us to live with hope in Christ in this fallen world. This sanctuary is a place to hear God speak, through preaching, Scripture, prayer and music from singing and instruments. It's a place where you and I are to meet Jesus on a "high mountain." This sanctuary is designed to enhance our ability to see and to meet Jesus, and to express your praise to him. Worship is also to honor and bless the Lord Jesus, even as this Transfiguration was also for Jesus' benefit—to prepare him to face the cross. Worship is not to please ourselves, but the Lord Jesus.

At this Transfiguration worship experience, these disciples not only saw Jesus and heard from God, they experienced awe and fell down before Jesus and received his touch, reassurance and comfort. They had an experience that prepared them to go back into the world of service with Jesus. This sanctuary is to be a place where we together come with confidence to the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace to help in our time of need (Heb. 4:12-14). But our worship life is not confined to this sanctuary. We need to worship God and hear his voice of love and encouragement as a daily experience, in a quiet place and time in your home, or as you take a walk, talking to him as you enjoy the sights of his creation. We all need a regular and daily time of worship, refocusing and re-centering our life of faith. Jesus himself found it necessary to be alone

with the heavenly Father (e.g. Mk. 1:35). Even in our corporate worship in this sanctuary, our focus should be on God and his speaking to us as though we're the only one here.

We who have experienced God's saving grace are daily being transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, whether we realize it or not. We've been born again into an everlasting relationship with Jesus Christ, who is changing us daily into his likeness through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes, *"...we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal"* (2 Cor. 4:17f).

Paul continues to speak of our longing to be with Christ *"in the heavens,"* in our temporary state prior to our bodily resurrection. And so, with that glorious prospect, we live to please the Lord in order to give a good accounting to him at his judgment seat (2 Cor. 4:16-5:10). God is at work in us, through good times and bad, through suffering and joyful living, to transform us inwardly and prepare us for everlasting glory. Christ living in us now is our hope of glory (Col. 1:27).

These three disciples were privileged to glimpse Jesus' glory in his transfigured appearance. What glory awaits us, when we shall see him in all his glory and then become like him (1 Jn. 3:2)! The glory for which we hope is also to add to God's pleasure in us, to hear him say as he said to his Son on the mountain, "This is my (child), the Beloved, with Whom I am well pleased" (v. 5), which amazingly is our glorious hope, that we hear his words commending us (Mat. 25:21; Lk.9:17). In our worship, our desire is to open our hearts to God's searching, seeking the voice of his gracious approval of us as his dearly loved children.

Peter's suggestion to build three tabernacles might have indicated a desire to make the sanctuary a place of retreat from the world. But Jesus led the disciples down from the mountain. The mountaintop worship experience was followed by service in the valley, where they would be confronted by a father, desperate for the healing and deliverance of his son. The experience of worship had prepared them to continue with worshiping hearts in the valley of human suffering and need. Worship is to be a heartfelt, life-changing experience that will inspire and enable us to serve in the valley.

Worship, instead of a retreat from the world, is more like battle-weary soldiers just momentarily hunkering down behind enemy lines, and getting a bit of rest, nourishment and the refreshing of the captain's orders before re-entering the battle for the Kingdom. As we depart the sanctuary, I hope we'll realize that the mountaintop experience of worship has prepared us to live a worshipful life of

service. There's a small banner as you exit the church concourse that reads, "After worship, the service begins."

Basketball players are urged by their coaches to "leave it all on the court," which means to hold nothing back, but to expend all energy and effort in the game, so that they'll know they gave it their all. If we've worshiped in spirit and in truth, we've acknowledged and confess all our sins, and have given our all anew to Christ, and will have left it all in this sanctuary.

I encourage each one of us, even when we find ourselves being less than inspired, to not leave this room until we are resolved to deepen our experience with Christ by strengthening our resolve to grow in our daily walk with him. We also should be reminded that we too are God's dearly loved children, with whom he is well pleased. The more we see Jesus in his word the more like him we'll become. Let's remember that we are being transformed and in God's time we'll be with him, Moses, Elijah and countless others in his glorious presence, forever. In the meantime, he'll transform us as we serve him "down in the valley" until he calls us to our everlasting home