



Sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A priest and a rabbi were seated next to each other at a community dinner. The rabbi asked, “if you worked really hard as a parish priest how high in the church could you rise?” The priest thought for a moment and said, “I could probably be a bishop if I worked hard enough.”

“And if you worked really hard as a bishop, could you move up from there?” The priest thought for a moment, “I could maybe be pope some day if I worked day and night without a break.” Then the rabbi asked, “And if you worked hard as a pope, where could you go from there?” Now the priest was truly perplexed, “higher in the church than pope? What do you want me to do, become God?” “Well,” said the rabbi, “one of our boys did it!”

Peter, James, and John might have something in common with the rabbi as they bear witness in today’s gospel story to the divinity of Jesus, a good Jewish boy who is revealed at something more than we might have imagined. This story of the transfiguration makes a nice bookend to the Epiphany season. We began with the visit of the magi and Jesus’ baptism – both stories that point to Jesus’ divine nature as the second person of the Trinity – and today’s story does as well. In fact, like the story of Jesus’ baptism, the transfiguration is a revelation of each person of God: in this story the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is in the flesh as the man Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is manifested, not as a dove as at the baptism, but as a cloud descending on the mountain, like the cloud that led Israel through the wilderness and descended on the mountain top at Sinai when Moses received the commandments.

The position in which Matthew places the transfiguration in his gospel is significant in at least two ways: first, if you keep reading past the section we heard this morning, Matthew tells the story of an epileptic child that the disciples are unable to heal. On the mountain top the disciples were graced with a brief unveiling of the life of the world to come, when the faithful of history will be face to face with the glorified Jesus, while in

the valley the disciples find their faith too weak to heal an epileptic. On the mountain top God's presence is clear and palpable in the glorified Jesus, the voice, and the cloud, while in the valley God's presence seems veiled – even hidden – in the midst of pain, suffering, and struggle. On the mountain top God the Father calls the disciples to behold his Son while in the valley a very human father calls on the disciples to behold his son and begs for the son's healing.

We all have mountain top moments in life, even if they are rare. Moments when God's presence seems as clear as day and we almost feel that we could reach out and touch the glory of the life to come. We also all have valley moments in life. Moments when, in our suffering and in the suffering of those we love, we cry out to God for deliverance and grace.

It is in regard to this experience of the valley that we find the second significance of the position of this story within the gospel. Matthew chapter 16, the chapter just before what we read this morning, is the point in the gospel when Jesus begins his journey away from Galilee and towards Jerusalem – when he turns his face away from teaching and towards the cross. Jesus is descending from the mountaintop of glory in Galilee into the valley of crucifixion in Jerusalem. He is going from being the glorified and beloved Son of the Father to becoming the suffering Son beset by pain and evil, like the boy who needs to be healed of epilepsy. In a sense he is on a journey to trade places with the boy: he will become the son in the clutches of evil and in doing so will set the boy, and all of humanity, free from the clutches of evil. He will exorcise humanity's demons by placing his own life into the very heart of our suffering.

This is part of the reason we read this story on the last Sunday before Lent. We also are descending from the mountain top of Epiphany into the valley of Lent. We are now on this journey with Jesus, from the place of God's clear and palpable presence into the place of struggle, even of suffering, and ultimately to the death of the old world that has ensnared us.

So here is what we must always bear in mind in the midst of the valleys. In the midst of Lent, in the midst of suffering, and in the midst of struggle, we must remember that on the other side of all of that is Easter. The cross is merely the prelude to the resurrection. Our suffering is merely the prelude to God's gracious deliverance. And the valleys we pass through in this life are merely low points in the journey towards the life to come.

And we are never alone. God is with us every step of the way, going ahead of us and bearing our pain for us. This is the lesson of Epiphany that we must carry with us through Lent and never forget: God is made manifest to us in both the mountain tops and the valleys, but ultimately in the way he turns crosses into resurrections.

Amen.