

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

8 Epiphany
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“On this mountain...”

There is a common denominator in our three scripture readings today. It is the word and concept of ‘the mountain.’ In many ancient cultures mountains play an important part in religious belief and practice. Even today there is something majestic about mountains that inspire us and at times fill us with awe. Israel’s literature and prayer is full of references to ‘God’s Holy Mountain’, the ‘Mountain of the Lord’ and on this ‘sacred mountain.’ The mountain is shrouded in mystery. In the Old Testament all the significant encounters with God take place upon a mountain.

Noah makes a covenant with God on Mount Attarrat. Moses confronts God at the Burning Bush on a mountain, and again on Mount Sinai, when he receives the Ten Commandments. David chooses Mount Zion, Jerusalem as his capital, and today the Prophet Elijah flees from King Aram and finds a refuge on a mountain. But it is God who seeks out Elijah. He is not found in the great wind or the earthquake, but in silence.

Our two New Testament readings today are both about the Transfiguration of Jesus and take place on a mountain. They are the strangest, most misplaced stories in the New Testament. They are strange because it is rare in Mark’s Gospel that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah or the Son of God. Yet, here he is on top of a mountain, revealing who he truly is, and terrifying his disciples. The three Apostles are frightened and amazed, more so by the appearance of Elijah and Moses. Most scholars agree that the story as it appears in Mark has deep significance and is coded for Mark’s church in Rome.

This is a passage written at a time when the Roman Empire had declared war on all Christians, at a time when open season was declared on killing Christians in the city in thousands. So what does it all mean?

Mark tells us that Jesus took Peter, James and John with him up the mountain. Peter was the recognized leader of the church in Rome in 64AD, but now languishes in prison, where Mark visits him each day. James becomes the leader of the church in Palestine but is executed by being thrown from the highest point of the Temple. John is the leader of the church in Ephesus, Asia Minor. He is condemned to death but survives only to be exiled on a Greek Island.

In the story, they remind us of Moses and Mount Sinai. Moses came down the mountain with his face so radiant the no one could look at him. In Mark’s story Jesus too shines and radiates so that he becomes dazzlingly white.

Mark is bringing a message to his persecuted church in Rome. It is a message which doubtlessly originates with Peter in prison. “Nero may kill and destroy your bodies by the thousand, but you must not fear for he cannot kill the Christ or his Church. God still dwells on his Holy Mountain and all you need do for salvation is to climb the mountain of

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the Lord by conquering your fear.” God’s law and his promises, represented by Elijah and Moses will live on, and ultimately they will be victorious.

This is a: “all you have to fear is fear itself” speech by Mark. Yes, the Apostles are terrified, as are the Christians in Rome. But with his reference to the voice and the cloud, Mark reminds them of the Exodus and the Baptism of Jesus, He is saying:

“Listen Christians here is a message from your leader Peter: “Be not afraid! God is with you. He did not desert Moses and the people in the desert. He will not desert you. Have faith. Jesus, who you saw baptized, is the Son of God. God will raise you up as he raised up Jesus and even death cannot conquer you, so have faith and believe.

This is a powerful Gospel. It is a Gospel soaked in the blood of those Early Christians who faced death, with the picture of the transformed Jesus stamped in their last dying thought.

Have you ever climbed a mountain? I mean a real mountain. From the base mountains look impressive, but near the top, shrouded in cloud and mist, mountains are scary. No sooner have you reached the top when you start to worry how to get back down. When the weather begins to close in, the one place you do not want to be is on top of a mountain, or half way back down for that matter.

In three days time the Season of Lent begins with the sure knowledge that it will last for 40 days. Lent is like ascending a mountain. It intends that we seek out and encounter our God. That in itself is a scary, frightening thought except that the first reading reminds us our God is not in the scary wind or earthquake, but the God who comes to us in the silence of our hearts.

Lent is our going out, like Jesus, to search and find ourselves for 40 days and if necessary to be transformed. Lent was the period used in the early church to prepare people for Baptism at Easter. They were called Catechumens. This was their final test; 40 days of fasting, study and prayer. On Easter night at the Vigil they would emerge from hiding to gather with the others Christians. They would walk into the waters of the sea or the river and be Baptized only to put on a white robe as they came up out of the water. The white robe symbolized Christ. This was their Transfiguration. Baptism made them clean, and transformed them into “Children of God.”

Was this what Mark was saying in his coded story? That if we are to be saved, we too must be transformed like Jesus?. We too must be baptized and arise to a new life in Christ.

You see, there is a sense in which Lent is the Season of Death. For many centuries Christians spent the 40 days of Lent wearing rags for clothes, with their faces masked by purple ashes. The idea of Lent was to die to your old sinful self, that you might be born anew at Easter.

Lent does fit into that Cycle of Life and Death that we follow each year with the liturgical seasons. But Lent is also, about transformation. Each of us must climb the mountain and take a long hard look at ourselves. That can be as scary as the mountain. Not only do we

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examine how we have kept the rules, but we also look at how we have kept our promises. For if we are indeed in a covenant with our God by virtue of our Baptism, then we need this inspection because our registration is due come Easter. Thankfully this is not our final judgment. But it is our annual check-up. Lent gives us time and opportunity to exam our priorities and look at the people we have become.

We all know it is necessary, we no longer have the time or space to listen to God amid the noise of life, yet alone in Elijah's silence. But we have that quiet inner voice reminding us that God needs to reach us. This Lent we must make room for God. It is as important as that.

In 1962 I was at boarding school on top of a mountain. Like many schools, things were imposed on you, homework, sports, music, church and Lent.

In Lent all music disappeared. No bells were rung even at services. In the dining room there was no dessert, no cake at tea, no soft drinks, and no treats. There was no TV, no Saturday night movies, no outings, no visits, and no birthday celebrations. Lent was austere. In Lent you went on long walks and spent a week on Retreat. Lent was grim and deliberately so. It always came at the end of winter. It began in snow but ended with the first signs of Spring. Lambs were being born, daffodils coming out and birds returning. Then it was Ester.

One again Lent will invite us all to reflect on our lives and our circumstances. We are also invited to change. In the tradition of Lent we are invited to do or try something that reminds us, on a daily basis, that this is Lent. It is a diet for the soul. There are things we have to cut out. Being mean, lazy, unkind, ungrateful, gossiping, willful, envious, jealous, pride, vanity, greed, selfishness, anger, whining, nagging, complaining, bossy, lying, aloof, deaf, uncaring, judgmental, unfair, sexist, rude, humorless, disdainful, cowardly, impatient and unloving. And that's just me! Don't laugh some of you are worse than I am.

You can: abstain from eating out, smoking for 40 days, nagging for 40 days, cook the meals if you don't usually, listen to your wife, pray together as a family or come to one of twelve special Bible Studies or Eucharist arranged by our Senior Warden. They will take place on Wednesday and Friday evenings throughout the season of Lent.

More than anything else, Lent gives the time and opportunity to begin again. To appreciate the one that we love; To repair relationships that are broken; to love the one we should have loved in the very first place. Lent affords us the opportunity to be the people that we set out to be.

This Lent let us as a community bear witness to the Gospel Story. Through prayer and good work let us travel the road to Easter together as that family that Christ meant us to be.

Amen+

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