

“They Saw No One Except Jesus”
Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration of our Lord
March 2, 2014

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! AMEN. The texts for this morning are the lessons and Gospel for this day.

For 30 years now I’ve been trying to “do right” by this text. You see, as a college student I heard my pastor give a sermon on the Transfiguration that made me feel I’d been lifted into the cloud of God’s presence on the top of the mountain, stood alongside Peter, James and John and witnessed Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah and heard the voice of God saying, **“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”**

I remember leaving church that morning ready to move into action down the mountain and out into the world, ready to make Lent that year a more meaningful journey toward Jerusalem, for that is where Jesus and the disciples were headed after they left the Mount of Transfiguration. What I forgot to do the next week was to pick up a copy of that sermon to add to my files. Pastor David V. Koch was a marvelous preacher and pastor to me and to my family. Mom sent us all his sermons for years – but not that one, I’ve looked!

So, in my quest to get into this text from Matthew for the 11th time (his version only comes up every 3 years) I was struck by the fact that I’ve never used Peter’s account from the letter he wrote later in his ministry as an entry point. Looking at the Gospel Peter seems to be as Peter always in – thick-headed and in the thick of getting things wrong once again – going head-long mouth-first into a situation without much reflection. “Let’s put up some tents and stay here” actually sounds pretty reasonable for Peter – I mean, the Children of Israel had first worshiped God at the Tabernacle – a tent – and then put up a temple of stone, gold, & jewels with bronze fixtures in a building shaped like this sanctuary where we worship. God had filled the Temple of Solomon with the cloud of God’s presence – the same Shekinah Glory Peter, James and John were about to experience when Peter proposed the tents idea.

But they weren’t there to establish a new place for worship on earth or a more palatable religion for all nations – no, as Peter lived out his life as a disciple and apostle this is what he said,

“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty! For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory... We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

Peter – one wonders how he was able to obey Jesus’ command to him and the other two as they came down the mountain, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” But, then again, how do you describe the indescribable?

Moses wrote in Exodus, “Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel.” Is it any wonder the Israelites doubted Moses would return? He entered into a “devouring fire.” It was there that Moses received the instructions for the construction of the tent that would be the Tabernacle – details of color, fabric, wash basins, robes for the priests – very intricate this shelter/habitation for the Lord but all the Israelites could see in the valley below was the “devouring fire.”

That same presence of God came down on the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter, James and John could endure seeing Jesus in all His glory and the eternal bodies of Moses and Elijah but they could not, would not have been able to survive seeing God’s full presence. No evil can stand in God’s presence. Moses was only able to glimpse God from behind as God passed by the cleft in the rock where Moses was told to hide.

Oh, they hear the voice: “**“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”**” They heard the voice and knew it was God but even being enveloped in the cloud of God’s presence made them fall to the ground and filled them with fear. I like the old King James here that says, “And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.” Having “fallen on my face” more than a few times and been “sore afraid” in certain situations I still can only begin to understand what it was like to be in the presence of the holiness of God. I do remember that when I felt God was leading me to go to seminary and I had no money to pay that when my godfather’s unexpected bequest came in the mail – the entire amount I needed with some to set aside for retirement. I literally fell on my knees when I opened the envelope – I could not stand – the grace of God overwhelmed me and a holy fear – a wonder at God’s power and love.

Peter, James and John seem to be a bit more overcome by fear than I was. Jesus had to come over and touch them. Touching them he said, “**Get up and do not be afraid.**” Imagine the hand of God touching you and telling you not to be afraid. That was underscored for Peter, James and John on that mountaintop – Jesus was, is, and ever shall be God’s only-begotten Son who came into the world to save us (John who was on the mountain wrote that, you know).

Sharing the Gospel of Jesus throughout Asia Minor and in Rome Peter was now free to tell people what he had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration – Jesus alight with the power of the glory of God – something he’d seen again in the resurrected Lord whose empty tomb he’d gone running to in the dawn of Easter morning. For those who weren’t on the mountain – who hadn’t feasted on fish at the lakeside with the Risen Christ Peter says, “**So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.**”

Peter points them to the Light – Jesus Christ, the Light of the World – the Light who shines in our darkness to show us the way, to follow the path He has made for us as we follow clothed in the righteousness He earned by coming down from that mountain and going to the cross. That righteousness is a gift and to follow by faith as we go out into the

world after feasting at the Lord's Table, learning from God's Word, remembering our baptism – the waters of death to life that God has brought us through – well, that life is to be a gift to others, marked by love. The love of Christ shines with the very glory of God – the “devouring fire” that covered the mountain top but now seen in deeds of love, kindness and in standing up for justice and mercy for all people. We are to be that light until the “morning star rises in our hearts” – that will happen when Jesus returns. Until then we are to be about God's work.

How can that be done? Where will that lead us? Are there paths before us to places unknown – decisions that will be made that will cause us to follow with a certain fear, clinging more fiercely to the hand of God? Actually, I think that is part and parcel of the everyday life of Christians – a life filled with joy that goes along with that fear – a life lived by trust in the one who did not fail and who was faithful in what needed to be done to save all who turn to Him by the faith He freely gives.

The most beautiful part of this Transfiguration text for me is not that Moses and Elijah appeared, that Jesus glowed in unearthly light or the image of 3 amazed beyond belief disciples one of whom talked about building tents and then fell on his face, it is when it simply says, “**And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.**” He was all they needed to see. To be known, called by name and touched by Jesus who gives us faith, lives in us through the power of the Holy Spirit that is all we will ever need. The song says, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face and the things of the world will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” Our Lenten Gradual will encourage you week after week, day by day to “Fix your eyes upon Jesus the author and perfecter of your faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

As we go down the mountain to do our Lord's work may our eyes stay fixed on Jesus who always has His eyes fixed on us in love. AMEN.

Now may our gracious God who gives us glimpses of His glory in His Son Jesus, bring us at last to the fullness of God's glory where finally we will see God as God is and Jesus, our Savior in all His glory.