

Sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 19, 2012, Year B
Mark 9:2-9

Good Morning!

The story of the Transfiguration that we just heard read in the gospel lesson is one of my favorite stories in scripture. In part, it brings back memories of my time in the Holy Land when my class from St. Georges' College visited Mt. Tabor, the site traditionally identified with the Transfiguration. Mt. Tabor is located in northern Israel in the Galilee region. It is a small mountain situated in a flat plane that can be seen from miles around. The road to the top of Mt. Tabor is a narrow and winding road that can accommodate one lane of traffic. We were told to exit our bus at the foot of the mountain and to climb into taxi vans for our ascent to the top. When we arrived at the summit of the mountain, we were greeted by a magnificent view of the country surrounding Mt. Tabor, as well as the ruins of an ancient monastery, and a Franciscan chapel. As with many sites in the Holy Land, it is strictly conjecture whether the Transfiguration actually took place there. But like many locations in the Holy Land, Mt. Tabor has been hallowed by the pilgrimages, prayers, and worship of countless pilgrims over the centuries. It is, indeed, a holy place.

The story of the Transfiguration today marks the last Sunday in the Epiphany season. This is one of two occasions during the Church year that we hear this story; the other being the Feast of the Transfiguration on August 6. The Transfiguration was a moment in the public ministry of Jesus when the divinity of Jesus was powerfully revealed to three of Jesus' disciples: Peter, James and John. In their presence, Jesus was transfigured in brilliant light with a voice from heaven declaring that He was God's Son. The Transfiguration is the exclamation mark to a liturgical season filled with biblical accounts of the manifestation of Jesus to the world. All of these manifestations are summed up in this one great revelation of the true identity of Jesus.

The Transfiguration is a prelude to the season of Lent that is due to begin in a few short days. Our gospel lesson today, which is found at the beginning of the 9th chapter in Mark's gospel, is sandwiched between two identical passages, one in the 8th chapter and one midway through the 9th chapter that

predicts the passion of Jesus. Our lesson today anticipates the events of Holy Week. To use the words in Luke's gospel following that Gospel's account of the Transfiguration, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem.

It should come as no surprise to us that the account of the Transfiguration has played a role in Christian spirituality. The Transfiguration is not only an event in the life and ministry of Jesus, it points to our potential destiny as Christian people. The Transfiguration revealed the divine glory in Jesus, and it anticipates the glorification of our human nature in Christ. I remember the story told by a Father Lasalle, a German Jesuit priest who spent much of his life in Japan. In addition to being a Catholic priest, he was recognized by the Japanese Zen community as a Zen master. His ministry fused together the ministry and spirituality of the Catholic Church with the practice of Zen. Fr. Lasalle had also been a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. In his writings about Zen, he commented about the brilliant flash of light from the bomb – light brighter than the sun – and how he had also experienced a brilliant implosion of light when he achieved enlightenment through his Zen practice. He underwent his own transfiguration as a result of his Zen meditation practice.

The theologians of the Eastern Orthodox Church have spoken of the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mt. Tabor as the goal of the Christian life. Like Jesus, we are to be transfigured by the uncreated divine light of Mt. Tabor...the divine light that will transform us. Thomas Merton once said that every human being is ablaze with divine light, and the great tragedy is that most of us go about our daily lives completely unaware that we are glowing like the sun. Our destiny is to follow and become like the One who said, "I am the light of the world."

Anthony Bloom, a Russian Orthodox Archbishop, repeats the story told by Nathaniel Hawthorne. He said, "In a village built on a high mountain cut by a stream and facing the little cluster of huts, very high up in the rock, a face has been carved in the rock from time immemorial; it is the face of the god of these villagers. It is a face of transcendent beauty, expressing an ineffable peace and complete harmony. And the villagers had handed down a promise from generation to generation that there will come a day when this god will detach himself from the mountain and live among them. They admire this face.....they are inspired by it.....and they fall back again and again into the cares of their poor community life. However, one day a child is born in the village who, from the moment he was capable of seeing, perceiving, and

responding, of submitting to external impressions, as soon as he could crawl from the hut where he was born to the edge of the stream, was struck by the beauty, serenity, and majesty of this face. One could always find him sitting beside the stream doing nothing but looking. The years pass, the baby becomes a little boy and later a young man. A day comes when the inhabitants of the village, seeing him pass by, stop and exclaim, 'Our god is in our midst!' By thrusting his gaze deep into this face, the young man had become inwardly conformed to the whole expression and spiritual content of this face, by gazing at it he had become imbued by it, he had allowed himself to be penetrated by the serenity, the grandeur, peace and love which radiated from that face of stone. And now his face had become that of the god whom he had venerated and quite simply gazed at."

And Bloom went on to say, "If only we knew how to gaze with all the depths of our being at the face of Christ, that invisible face which we can see only by turning toward our own depths and which we can see emerging from there, then those around us would relive the impact of a serenity, a deepening, a peace, a power both strong and gentle." In other words, we would be transfigured.

As most, if not all of you know, I have a strong interest in contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is a very simple form of prayer, as natural as breathing. It is simply, in the words of St. Gregory the Great, a "resting in God." It involves sitting silently and consenting to the presence of God within us. There are various methods that are used but they share a common goal of simply being with God. When a person gives him or herself continually to God in this manner, over time, the uncreated light and energies of God begin to transfigure us. In the words of one of the blessing prayers in our prayer book, the "peace of God that passes all understanding," begins to take hold in our lives, changing us, reordering our priorities, until we increasingly become more Christ-like.

In Psalm 119, we are told, "Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path." This day reminds us that the light that is shed upon our path is the uncreated light of Mt. Tabor, the transfiguring divine light that was revealed in Jesus, and that awaits to guide and transform us.