

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany Year A, 2008
(Transfiguration Sunday)
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Today is the last Sunday after the Epiphany; the Epiphany season is short this year. The beginning of Lent determines the length of the Epiphany season, and Lent's start, in turn is driven by Easter. In a magnificent way, this last Sunday of the Epiphany looks through Lent to Easter and gives us a foretaste of the Resurrection. The Gospel story tells us about the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ.

Listen as Matthew tells us this story. Jesus wanted to go to a remote area to pray. He asked his closest friends, Peter, James and John to come with him and, together, they climbed a high mountain, by themselves. Alone, in the wilderness of that mountain, we may infer that in meditation and prayer, they felt the presence of Almighty God.

Suddenly, in the solitude of that place and experience, a strange and wonderful thing happened. Jesus, Matthew tells us, stood transfigured before his disciples. He appeared different to them. His clothes were dazzling white and his face shown like the sun.

As suddenly as this transformation, Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet, and Moses, who led Israel from bondage, stood there with them, talking with Jesus. Peter, James and John were stunned. They wanted to stay on the mountain. They wanted this experience to continue. They wanted to build dwellings and camp, there, forever. But, this was not to be, and their discussion was interrupted as they heard that heavenly voice, speaking from a cloud. It was the same voice that spoke on the occasion of our Lord's baptism, that we read about a few Sundays back. It was the same voice with the same message, a message for Peter, James and John: "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And then, just as suddenly, the experience was over. There remained with them only Jesus. It was time to return to the valley.

This story tells us once again of a theophany, an experience of a special revelation of God, done on God's terms and in God's own time. There is clearly a link, here, with the theophany of the baptism and the identification of Jesus as the Son of God. But there is even more in this Gospel reading, and it is of great significance. Matthew described what we call the Transfiguration, a word we get from the Greek. The word is *metamorphothe*, or metamorphoses. The literal meaning is to change one's form. In the moment of the Transfiguration, Jesus was revealed as he would be at the moment of the Resurrection. God took Peter, James and John on a journey transcending time and gave them a glimpse of our Lord's future glory, and they beheld the Risen Christ.

Do not think of this as somehow a removal of the scales of spiritual blindness. This is a gross misinterpretation of the Transfiguration. The disciples were not spiritually blind and this was not something that spiritual health would have revealed. This was a special outpouring of God's grace. The Transfiguration pointed to what Easter itself would usher

in, the Risen Lord. The disciples saw him, as he would be, not as he was. It was a glimpse into the future.

It is interesting that the disciples wanted to stay where they were and cling to the vision. They did not want to come down from the mountain because they did not want to come down from that spiritual high. But Jesus led them from the mountain, ordering them to tell no one of the vision until he was raised from the dead. If you read on in this story, Jesus then began to teach his disciples that he must suffer and die, and he told them that if they wanted to be disciples, they had to also take up the cross and follow. This was not something that they wanted to hear. They did not want to hear that Jesus would die. Peter, especially wanted to argue against it and our Lord rebuked him strongly. It's hard to let go of the spiritual highs but the lesson today is an important lesson. There is no Easter without Good Friday and, for us, there can be no Easter with out a season of Lent. There are Lents that we live that have nothing to do with days on a calendar; there are times of our lives that are spiritual valleys. There are always dark moments, but in the darkest of moments the light can most brightly shine.

The Transfiguration points to what will be, to remind us of where we are. The Transfiguration points us to Easter as it prepares us for Lent. It keeps us grounded in our world, today, even as we move on in our life in faith. *Amen.*