

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, February 19, 2023

The Last Sunday After the Epiphany (Quinquagesima)

Festal Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

on

Matthew 17:1-9

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Sore Afraid

“And behold a voice out of the cloud, said, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid.” In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor is among the most enchanting and mysterious events in the Gospels. Not even witnessing him exorcise ferocious demons and feeding multitudes of people could have prepared the disciples Peter, James, and John for what would happen on that mountain top. And after having preached on the Transfiguration a number of times, usually dwelling on the wonder and glory of this sequence, this time I find myself dwelling on the disciples’ fear: “they fell on their face, and were sore afraid.” This is not some kind of quiet dread, this is the kind of visceral fear that makes the friends of Jesus cower in the dirt. And with a cursory reading, this seems to come out of the blue. Why would the disciples be “sore afraid” at this point? Why would this be the upshot of their experience of this vision, to shut their eyes and hide like a child hiding under the covers from a fearsome shadow?

After all, it all looks so wonderful. Like a dream come true for God’s faithful children, with sights that would have struck every ancient chord in their spirit. So much of the Transfiguration is like some reverberation of the events on Mount Sinai in the Torah. Jesus became blindingly bright, just as Moses had done long ago. And not only was there piercing light, but Moses *himself* was there. And the great prophet, Elijah, too! Denizens of heaven, as prominent as they come speaking with Jesus. What could be more encouraging than this, for Peter, James, and John, these stout-hearted fishermen? If they had any doubts or worries, they must have evaporated in the light of this glory and this holy company.

Peter doesn’t cower. He steps right up, brazenly interrupting the conversation that was taking place between Jesus and the prophets of old. What does he say? He wants to capture this lightning in a bottle, three bottles in fact, three tabernacles, one for Elijah, one for Moses, and one for Jesus, a kind of triple temple complex to rival the Temple in Jerusalem. This Peter believes is the time for a new start, a new era. And this is all predicated on his understanding that Moses and Elijah have returned permanently. Why would he think anything else? They are right there, back to save them from occupation of the Land and corruption of the Temple. It is just so heartbreaking. Peter truly believes that this is the culmination of their work, the way out, the path forward, the triumphant shining light of the victory of heaven come to earth. And why would poor Peter think anything else?

It would have been exhilarating, too, because he and Jesus had only just had a bitter dispute over the future. Jesus had just started telling them all that he was to go to Jerusalem, confront the powers that be, suffer greatly, die, and be raised up. And when Peter protested, Jesus said “Get behind me, Satan!” and that they should take up his cross and follow him, and that whosoever would lose their life would save it. Jesus was talking about one of the most difficult paths that Peter could imagine, practically horrifying, even with the assurances.

What a relief it must have been to see that light, and those heroes, and to get caught up in visions of victory and restoration of their world that had gone off the rails.

But just as Peter interrupted Jesus and his colleagues, Peter’s planning was interrupted. As on Mount Sinai long ago, a great cloud enveloped Jesus, the prophets, and these disciples just as it had done around Moses when he communed with the Most High and chiseled God’s covenant on stone. It would have been like the cloud of incense that enveloped the high priests in their temple liturgies on the Holy Mount of Jerusalem. Well, it wouldn’t have been like it, it would have been far better, the true cloud of glory which the priests sought to evoke.

And then, a voice from that cloud, was it the same voice from Jesus’ baptism? It was saying some of the same things. All very positive. “This is my beloved Son.” All very affirming. “In whom I am well pleased.” All very inspiring until the hammer falls. “Hear ye him!” Not you Peter, him. Not your plans Peter, his! You may not be pleased with Jesus’ considerations of suffering and death and resurrection, thinking that there must be a better or more comfortable way. And if you aim to follow him, to be a son in whom I am well pleased, well, then, you must listen to what he has said, and know that his fearsome path is now yours. This voice strips them of all their bargaining and denial. They don’t only see Jesus anew, they know Jesus anew. They are confirmed in what Jesus means to do with his life, despite what Jerusalem will do with him.

For Peter and James and John the world opened up in triumph on that mountain only to, moments later, come crashing down upon their heads, the weight of that glory causing them to crumble in a pile on the ground and hide their eyes from that harsh light, and stop their ears from that terrible voice. “They fell on their face, and were sore afraid.”

It is so very beautiful, though, that Jesus leaves his conversation, touches each of them. He doesn’t change his mind, though. He doesn’t tell them everything will be okay. He touches their cowering forms and tell them to rise up from the earth (as he will rise) and to be not afraid. And somehow, it works. They open their eyes, they rise from the ground, and they see no cloud, no light, just Jesus. But, in a big way, not the Jesus they knew before. They now saw him anew and knew anew. Without the light and the cloud he was still transfigured in their spiritual sight. And if they were still afraid, it wasn’t enough to make them cower, and it wasn’t enough to stop them following him all the way back down the mountain, and all the way to Jerusalem, somehow equipped to follow Him, even if it means taking up a cross, which it would for James, John, and Peter.

The deeper truth I see of the Transfiguration is that the true resolve of Jesus’ ministry is revealed, and that the glory of the Lord shines even in the suffering and death of Jesus to come, pre-figured on that mountain. And the Transfiguration reveals that the glory of the Lord has not only penetrated into the depths of Christ’s suffering, but also their suffering, and even all human suffering and death. What makes the glory of God truly glorious is that, as Peter would later write, the light “shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.”

The Transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor is not just for the disciples to process this reality, but for us. I think this is the true task of any Christian liturgy committed to the beauty of holiness using language, craftsmanship, and music. Every liturgy, like this one, is meant to be a microcosm of the Transfiguration. Here at St. Thomas you can find bright light, clouds, and even denizens of heaven standing among us in

shining stone. Yes, an earnest reflection of the glory of the Lord, but not so that we might stay here forever in comfort and ecstasy, but we are here so that we might be provisioned to leave this place, and go to even the dark places of our world, the still-churning Golgothas, to be as Christ would, confident that the glory of the Lord is shining even there, and that the love, mercy, and grace that the Spirit gives us will bear fruit even there. In the transfiguration, and our liturgy, we are shown the moon in the dark, so that we might not cower in a night of peril, but stride with God and neighbor in love whether on summit or valley until we might see the sun at the dawn. “Arise, and be not afraid.”