

Pastor's Sermon

Transfiguration of Our Lord

March 2, 2025

Glimpsing the Glory

My High School and college friend Lou is retired and living in coastal Florida. I lost contact with him when he dropped out of college and joined the Air Force. We have renewed our friendship after connecting on, of all places, Facebook. Surprise! One of his retirement passions has become SCUBA diving. He often posts photos of fish and flora he finds on his adventures. He tells me that one of the simplest things he has learned is that seeing the ocean from the surface is only a fraction of what there is to know about the ocean. The majesty and mystery of the waters are beyond belief. You could be a sailor, live your whole life at sea and still not know every coastline, island, and current. But if never you stick your head below the surface with a face mask on, you will know very little about the waters of the deep. And if do stick your head down into the waters with a mask on, still will know very little about the mysteries of the deep, but you will know a lot more about how much more there is to know. There is a lot of reality down there that you simply cannot see without passing through the veil of the ocean's surface.

In our second reading, Paul writes that discovering the glory of God is a lot like that, it's as though we have a veil over our faces. It's as though someone had pulled the wool over our eyes. We only see a very limited view God. We can read the Bible all we like without ever seeing what the words are trying to reveal to us. We can read the Bible from cover-to-cover and still be like a sailor trying to know the ocean from its surface; reality is there, but we just can't see it. There is a whole lot of reality that you simply can't see without passing through the veil. Even then we just get a small glimpse of the majesty of our God. The first thing we have to say is that nobody knows who God is or what God is. We like to think we know all there is to know about God, but we just get a glimpse, small piece. All any of us can say is how we believe that we have experienced the presence God in our lives.

There is an old Buddhist parable that illustrates what I'm trying to say. Some of you are familiar with it. It's called the Wise Blind Men and the Elephant. There was a group of blind men that heard that a strange animal called an

elephant was coming to their town. They had no idea what an elephant was or how it looked. None of them were aware of its shape or form. Not one of them had experienced an elephant before. Out of curiosity they said, "We must inspect this elephant and know it by touch, of which we are capable." So they sought it out. When they found it, they groped about it and shared their "vision." The first blind man placed his hand on the trunk. "This being is like a thick snake." The second placed his hands upon an ear. "The elephant is like a kind of fan." Another placed his hand upon a leg. "The elephant is more like a pillar, a tree trunk." The fourth blind man touched the elephant's side and declared, "The elephant is more like a wall." The next blind man grasped the tail and compared the elephant to a rope. The last one touched the tusk and said, "The elephant is hard and smooth, much like a spear." When the blind men discovered their disagreements, they accused each other of not telling the truth and came to blows. It was only when they stopped talking over each other and started listening and collaborating that they began to "see" a full elephant. Even then, they only learned that even together they were all only partially correct and partially wrong. Accepting that one's subjective experience is true, but it may not be the totality of truth.

In today's Gospel, we heard a description of three disciples having an experience of the veil being pulled back and they caught a glimpse of more of the reality about Jesus than they were used to seeing. They were amazed to the point of fear. Most of the time, they could see nothing more about Jesus than they could see about anyone else. He said and did some extraordinary things, but it wasn't obvious to everybody that he was much, much more. They saw him as nothing more than another prophet or outstanding spiritual teacher.

On the mountaintop, Peter, James, and John learned something new about him. They climbed up the mountain with Jesus for day's prayer retreat. They had no idea what experience they about to have. When the transfiguration happened, they still had no understanding. They had no idea how that experience gave them a glimpse of the glory God in Jesus, God in the flesh. They had no idea that, according to Luke, they were blessed with a vision of the resurrected Christ that they would see very soon in Jerusalem.

You and I probably will not have experiences like those three disciples had on that mountain top. Who would believe us if we did? But every one of us gathered here are having the veil that limits our understanding, pulled back just a little. We have had various mountaintop experiences, some big, most small, that enable us to get such a glimpse the glory of God. We get to see the depths of reality that we have never previously seen, a vision like never before. Faith. Maybe it happens occasionally through worship, or sharing the Lord's Supper or remembering an icon of faith or that special person that touched our lives. Perhaps it's never been that dynamic, but a gradual notice over time as the veil is pulled back. You're seeing life through increasingly opened eyes after getting a glimpse of the glory of God and it changed your life.

No matter where or how that glimpse of glory comes, the next step is always the same. Jesus leads us back down the mountain to reconnect with activity and demands of normal life that awaits us in the valley below, with all its pain and struggle. But our normal existence never looks quite the same as it did before we saw that glimpse of the glory. We reenter life with a new sense of service and mission, with a new vision and perspective of what life is all about. Christ is pulling back the veil from our eyes. Every glimpse of the depths of reality, every glimpse of the risen Christ becomes a new understanding in the vision that sustains us. We are transfigured, changed. Now we are more and more what we created to be. We come together, share our experiences, visions, hopes, differences, and dreams. That is church, diverse people with different, lives, different talents, different gifts, different perceptions coming together in the name of the risen Christ to share and serve as one.

Jesus' ministry is not transformative and redemptive because of what he did on that mountaintop. The Transfiguration story raises more questions than answers. It is more mysterious than explained. That event is profound, yet cryptic, transformative yet changing little about the pressing challenges that await us. Like many spiritual mountaintop experiences, it offers us a glimpse of God. A glimpse that alters our perspective, our faith more than our circumstances. With Jesus' disciples we are called, not to understand everything, but simply to "listen to him!" We don't get to stay on the mountaintop trying to reclaim that majestic experience over and over again.

We return to the valley, even the valley of the shadows, to bear witness to what we have seen and heard, to share and serve, to bring our witness of the new life that is ours in Christ. The veil is lifted. We get a glimpse of the glory. We can challenge the demons that seize us empowered by a new shared vision. The veil is lifted enough so that we can be astounded and empowered by the greatness of God. We are given a new hope as we share together glory of the risen Christ. Amen.