

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 19 February 2023
Transfiguration of Our Lord - Year A

1st Reading: *Exodus 24:12-18*

Psalm: 2

2nd Reading: *II Peter 1:16-21*

Gospel: *Matthew 17:1-9*

Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There he goes again. And we all shake our heads. That bumbling disciple Peter is sticking his foot in his mouth yet again, saying something he probably regretted later, and now it's written down for all eternity and millions upon millions of people know about his foolish mistakes. "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

I don't know about you, but I've heard quite a few sermons where that was the main theme. We can all relate to how foolish Peter was on occasion – thinking he could walk on water, then sinking when he got afraid, blurting out statements that Jesus then had to correct, and eventually denying that he even knew Jesus at the most critical moment – and what does this teach us? It must mean that God loves just about anybody, especially us when we have a "Peter" moment and say or do something foolish.

But the more I've read the Bible over the years, the more I have come to see that this isn't really a true picture of Peter at all. Would Jesus really have chosen a bumbling idiot as his right hand man just to prove how fallible human beings are? We know that John was what we might call the "teacher's pet" – the disciple whom Jesus loved – and he went on to write his Gospel, which is recognised as one of the most spiritual and sublime pieces of literature ever written. But Peter was Jesus' star pupil – the rock on which Jesus would build his church, although we seem to have the impression that this rock was more like shifting sand than an immovable mountain. So what is going on here?

Well, I have come to appreciate that Peter was actually an incredibly brilliant man, able to read situations and make leaps of logic that everyone else completely missed. Remember that "walking on water" incident? Peter had seen that Jesus was able to command the wind and the waves, and they were able to obey him, even though they weren't even living creatures.

So, his brilliance told him, if Jesus were to command me, just as he had commanded the wind and the waves, then I would be able to obey him just as they had been able to. And he was right... except... he hadn't taken into consideration his own respect of the sea as a seasoned fisherman. So was Peter foolish? I don't think so. He was *impetuous*, and that was perhaps his weak spot. He made these brilliant leaps of logic and then acted on them, but before he had taken all of the consequences into consideration.

And that's exactly what happened here on the mountain of the Transfiguration. If we read the Bible carefully we will note that when people have a significant encounter with God – like Jacob having his dream about angels ascending and descending on a heavenly ladder – the proper response is to build a shrine on the spot of that encounter. Jacob erected a pillar there.

So here we have Peter, along with John, the “teacher's pet”, and John's brother James, having a profound divine encounter. Not only are they seeing the true glory of Jesus, but Moses and Elijah – two of the greatest figures from Israel's past – are here with him. What an amazing experience. And what is Peter's response? He is already thinking ahead. He knows that building a shrine is what one does when one has such an experience, so he suggests to Jesus that he will do that very thing – build three shrines: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. What an amazing leap of logic – to understand that he is in the midst of a divine encounter and yet sees what he should do about it.

He isn't a bumbling fool, blurting out something stupid. He is making a brilliant observation – understanding the experience he is having right at the moment instead of waiting to reflect on it later. But he is *impetuous*. He is getting way ahead of himself. Instead of taking in the whole experience, he has already mentally moved beyond it. And so God's voice is heard: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well please; listen to him!” Don't rush this moment! And, of course, what God the Father is saying is to affirm exactly what he had said previously at Jesus' baptism.

It is no coincidence that the Baptism of Jesus and his Transfiguration, the feasts we celebrate at the beginning and the end of this season after Epiphany, also mark the beginning and the end of Jesus' public ministry. He will now go to Jerusalem to complete his life's mission, and this is his *true* glory that Peter, James, and John are about to witness.

So, did Peter ever get the chance to return to this mountain and build his shrines, which would have been very appropriate? Well, not exactly. But he *did* enshrine the experience in his own description of it in his second letter, as we read today.

The Second Letter of Peter is one of the oddest books in the New Testament, very different from his First Letter, and we only read from it twice in our three-year Lectionary – the other time was during Advent this year. The only New Testament books which receive less attention are the Second and Third Letters of John, the two shortest books in the Bible, which we *never* read from in the church... but that's a shame, and it's another story.

One of the things that makes Second Peter so odd is that Peter seems to have used particularly poetic language to express his thoughts in this letter, probably written just before his execution. Indeed, the passage we read contains one of my favourite phrases in the entire Bible: “You will do well to be attentive to [the Gospel] as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” What beautiful imagery!

And Peter's description of the Transfiguration is also dramatic: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but 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, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.”

Now, when he uses the word “we” here, he isn't really including James and John, but is using the word “we” to indicate that he is giving his solemn word about what he actually saw as an eyewitness, just like kings and queens say “*We* decree such and such”, and God himself says in Genesis, “Let *us* make man in *our* own image.” There are a number of examples of this in the Gospel and letters of John, and what Peter is saying by using “we” in this way is that this is his solemn testimony: “I swear that I myself was an eyewitness of his majesty.”

It is also worth noting that this is the only incident from Jesus' life that any of the apostles wrote about in their letters, so this truly was a significant experience that left a profound impact on Peter. And as I said, it marks the pinnacle of Jesus' ministry, and the pivotal point after which he will turn his attention to his passion in Jerusalem. And so after this glorious celebration of Jesus' true glory, we too will turn our attention in Lent to the dark roads we will encounter as we follow Jesus, until that most glorious celebration on Easter when the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts.

Amen!

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