

Homily for Last Epiphany  
February 27, 2022  
S. Stephen's, Providence

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is one of those Sundays where our Gospel reading  
takes on epic cinematic dimensions.

Dizzying mountain heights, supernatural lights,  
an apparent rip in the fabric of time, and even the voice of God.

This Sunday is also a crucial turning point in the liturgical year,  
one which also places us on a mountain height from which  
we can look out in two directions:

if we look back,

we see the light of Christmas and Epiphany,

this whole season of manifestations of God's glory,

culminating in the Transfiguration of Christ upon the mountain peak.

Like Jesus,

from this height we can also look ahead and see Jerusalem in the distance.

We cannot stay on this mountain,

and we will be compelled to follow Jesus towards Jerusalem,

and all that he will accomplish there,  
as we prepare ourselves for Holy Week and Easter  
with the beginning of our Lenten observance in a few days.  
In all three synoptic accounts of the Transfiguration  
it is made clear that only three of the disciples, Peter, John, and James,  
are taken up the mountain with Jesus:  
the other disciples will not be permitted to experience this event.  
And yet through our own reading and hearing of it,  
the Gospel writer invites us to also see and behold!  
You and I are taken up the mountain and given this glimpse  
of God's glory made radiant in Jesus,  
so that we may not lose hope  
even in the shadow of the Cross which looms in the distance.  
This event – the Transfiguration – appears to be as much for Jesus  
as it is for those three disciples.  
If you're a fan of the Harry Potter books or films,  
you'll recall that in *The Deathly Hallows*,  
just before Harry prepares to surrender to Voldemort,

he uses the Resurrection Stone to summon the spirits of his parents,  
along with Sirius and Remus,  
who encourage and comfort him,  
giving him the strength to do what he must do next.

Jesus needs no magic stone, of course.

He is one with the Father, and so he begins to pray.

It is as he is in prayer on this mountain top that Elijah and Moses  
also appear alongside him.

We don't know the exact words of their conversation,

but as they discuss Jesus's departure from Jerusalem,

I like to imagine they likewise provided solace and encouragement  
in light of the ordeal that was to come.

By the presence of Elijah and Moses, the two greatest prophets of Israel,

we also see that the loving purposes of God

and the story of Israel have all been culminating in this moment,

in the life of Jesus, and what he will accomplish in Jerusalem.

As I ponder and meditate upon the Gospel readings,

I often try to imagine myself in them,

or consider who within the story is resonating with me.

This morning, I cannot help but identify with Peter.

On one hand, I cannot fathom what it would be like

to come that close to the very life force of God,

and to see the portals of time seemingly opened up in front of me.

The only emotion I can imagine is one of terror.

And yet Peter, always quick to speak before thinking,

sees that Elijah and Moses are about to leave and doesn't want it to end!

Whatever is unfolding before his eyes is beautiful and holy,

and he wants it to last – he wants to capture the moment.

If this were the year 2022, Peter would probably be taking a selfie

with his iPhone to post to Instagram,

but this is first century Palestine.

“Master it is good that we are here!” Peter exclaims.

“Let me build three dwellings for the three of you,

where you can stay and be glorious and radiant as long as you like!”

The Gospel writer seems to hint at the absurdity of what Peter says,

noting that Peter didn't know what he was saying.

But I get it. The desire to dwell in safety.

The desire to stay in the beauty of holiness when the world outside seems to be filled with hardships and uncertainty.

Like the last strains of a beautiful piece of music,  
the final glass out of a bottle of champagne,  
or the final day of a much-needed vacation –  
we don't want it to end.

We want to stay in the cocoon of beauty and comfort.

Like Peter, we want to stay on the mountaintop,  
basking in the safety and perfect glory of God.

But the reality is that, like Peter, and of course like Jesus,  
we are called to go back down the mountain  
into the danger and messiness of the world.

Like many of you, I suspect,

I have watched more hours of news this week than I normally do.

The world watches with concern, anxiety, and heartbreak  
as the people of Ukraine both flee and fight back against  
the unprovoked Russian invasion of their country.

What has been most heartbreaking to me to see  
are the number of people who until days ago  
had been going about their ordinary lives,  
refusing to believe that this conflict would really come –  
we prayed it would not.

Now those who cannot flee or do not wish to flee  
find themselves thrust into situations beyond their choosing:  
mothers of young children ready to defend them with guns;  
young men separated from mothers and sisters  
because they are legally required to stay and fight.

Perhaps most unlikely of all,  
the charismatic TV actor-turned-populist politician,  
the Ukrainian President,  
has become a profile in courage this week.

Offered safety and an escape to become a Ukrainian government in exile,  
he and other ministers have stayed not only in Ukraine,  
but the capital city of Kiev, knowing they have a target on their backs.

I do not know what will happen – only time will tell.

But I do know that we cannot turn away.

It is all a reminder that sometimes we do not have a choice –  
that the messiness and the danger of the world come to us,  
despite all our efforts to steer clear of them.

Peter must have felt that way on Good Friday,

watching in horror as the same one he saw

glowing with the radiance of God,

is taken and killed by mob violence –

so filled with fear by these events is Peter that he even denies his Lord.

But that low point will not define Peter.

He will survive the ordeal and witness the Resurrection,

and be the bedrock of the infant Church.

Outside of the Gospels, his will be the other written account

of the Transfiguration, as he writes:

“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.” (2 Peter 1:16-18)

Peter was given that glimpse of God's glory and majesty.

It hinted at and promised what was to come.

As Christians, we are called to trust in the promises of God.

Through Christ's victory over sin and death in his Resurrection,

we are assured that God's love triumphs over all wrongs.

In our baptisms, we are assured that we are beloved children of God,

marked with the sign of that Cross that gives victory

over all the forces which would seek to draw us away from God.

Even as we leave the safety of those mountain top moments,

to journey back down into the uncertainty of the world,

we carry with us that assurance and promise that God gives us.

That promise lives within us and gives us faith and hope.

When commenting on the Transfiguration,

Thomas Aquinas says that Jesus began to shine with a radiance of heaven

so as to entrance us with the prospect of our own beautiful transfiguration.

We are promised that we shall be made like him,

and that we will one day see him face to face,

even though, as St. Paul reminds us in our epistle reading this morning,



we may for now only see in a mirror dimly

the reflection of that radiance.

But on Christ we set our hope,

knowing that one day we and the whole creation will be transfigured.

It is worth noting that our concept of heaven and the reign of God

as taking place in this far off realm up in the clouds

is a concept that is not actually found in scripture.

The writers of the New Testament primarily write of a vision

of heaven coming down to earth.

This is the world which God has made and called good.

This world, like all of us, will be transfigured by God's glory.

Even now, it is breaking in all the time.

Even here, in this place,

as we look at one another and see the glory of God reflected

in the face of friend and stranger alike,

as we gather around the altar of God to bask in his presence and glory

in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood,

itself a pledge of our future inheritance.

It is a wonderful place in which to dwell.

One day that glory will come and earth will see the new Jerusalem  
coming down from heaven.

One day we will stay on top of the mountain,  
in that vision of Isaiah in which the Lord prepares a feast of untold  
delights for all his people.

One day we will stay on top of the mountain,  
but today we must descend with Jesus,  
and set our faces like flint toward Jerusalem  
and all that will be accomplished there.

One day we will stay on top of the mountain,  
but that day is not today.

Amen.