

Jim Gordon Holy Faith 3 March 2018 Last Epiphany Exodus 34: 29-35  
Psalm 99 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 Luke 9:28-43a

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

This morning, I'm thinking about Peter. Peter is remembered as chief among the apostles, a rock of the early church, a man who went to his crucifixion proclaiming the faith.

Yet in many places of the Gospels, it seems as though Peter is the comic relief, the one who says the wrong or the inexplicable.

In today's Gospel, Peter — along with James and John — has followed Jesus up a mountainside, and there he beholds a wonder, Jesus transfigured, his clothes described as whiter than white in language reminiscent of the description of God in the book of Daniel. As if that isn't enough, the dazzled disciples see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah.

An astonishing scene — but not astonishing enough to keep Peter from putting in his two cents worth. "Master," he says, "it is good for us to be here. Let us build three booths — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Almost in response, it seems, God Almighty's voice pierces the air: "This is my Son, my Chosen — listen to him!" which could be translated, "Peter, pipe down."

Peter's words have often been regarded as nonsensical. So nonsensical that Luke actually gives Peter a bit of an excuse. Peter was terrified, Luke says, and so he didn't know WHAT to say.

Well, he could have said nothing. In this situation, James and John must be just as rattled as Peter, but somehow they manage to avoid verbalizing the first thing that comes into their heads.

Still.

In the past few days I've thought about Peter and thought about his words, and I believe he deserves a break.

If Luke's chronology is accurate, what's taken place just before the Transfiguration is Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, for which — in the Gospel of Matthew, at least — Peter gets no small praise. But that's followed by Jesus' first prediction of his Passion — his arrest, suffering and crucifixion. Then, in Mark's Gospel, and it's believed that Peter was the main source of Mark's Gospel, Peter rebukes Jesus for his prediction, and then gets rebuked in return — the famous "Get thee behind me, Satan."

Look at these reversals: In short order, the disciples go from euphoria — Jesus IS the Christ, Alleluia! — to confusion and despair: Jesus will suffer and die? Peter goes from being the fair-haired boy for his first correct answer to being compared to Satan. That's quite a 180. Peter has been emotionally whipsawed.

So, that's the backdrop, the context, for Peter and James and John's trip up the mountain. Peter may be terrified at first by the supernatural things he sees, but for all that, he doesn't suddenly turn and sprint back down the mountain.

In fact, I think Peter wants to stay where he is. As long as everybody remains just where they are, there IS no rejection of Jesus; there IS no trial, no torture, no death.

"Master, it is well that we are here. Let us make three booths, one for you, and one for Moses and one for Elijah."

"We'll sleep on the ground, no problem. But let us stay here."

But there is no staying on that mountain. The three disciples — led by Jesus in all ways — will go back into the world, to love it, to witness to it, to heal it, to suffer for it.

But in the Transfiguration, God has given Peter, James and John something most valuable, a glimpse of glory — Jesus' post-Resurrection glory. And they can keep the memory of this glory with them; they can take it with them when they go down the mountain. They will not totally understand this gift until later. But the memory is still theirs, and will be with them when they need it.

But what about us?

Well, just as Peter, James and John, following Jesus, ascend the holy mountain, so we, too, ascend every Sunday. We begin when we enter this beautiful church. We continue when we hear the word of God spoken to us and when we exchange the peace of Christ. And we ascend most certainly at the Holy Eucharist. That's what is given US to take with us when WE go down the mountain and into the world, to love it, to witness to it, to heal it, sometimes to suffer for it. The Eucharist is OUR glimpse of post-Resurrection glory — IF we can but see it.

Many years ago I spent a few days at an Episcopal monastery in upstate New York, Holy Cross. A priest there told a story about a celebration of the Eucharist that seemed to him to be particularly powerful. "Wow," he told the deacon afterward, "that was spectacular. Too bad they ALL can't be like that."

She told him, "They ARE all like that — we just don't always see it."

Which brings us back to the Transfiguration — the sight and the sound.

In the Gospel of John, after Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, there's a moment when God Almighty speaks audibly to His Son, assuring him that he will be glorified. But the people around Jesus at the time hear only thunder. Which makes me wonder, if bystanders without the gift of faith had stumbled upon the Transfiguration, what would they have seen? What would they have heard? What would WE have seen and heard?

Give Peter — and James and John — credit. They understand imperfectly, but, with the gift of faith, they DO see God and HEAR God on the holy mountain.

In a few minutes, God will reveal Himself again, here in the Holy Eucharist. As He does, the world — OUR world — with its troubles and its challenges and its pain, as well as its beauty — awaits.

Today we bury the alleluias. Ash Wednesday is three days away. Lent, with its focus on fasting, penitence, introspection is nearly upon us. Like Peter, we may not be eager to hurry down the mountain. But, again like Peter, we will be given something most valuable to take with us.

In a few minutes, when we hear the Eucharistic prayer, when we hear Fr. Robin say the words of institution — This is my body ... this is my blood — when the Real Presence of Christ is placed into our hands, I pray we do get a glimpse of God's glory. As the Real Presence enters our body, I pray we feel it and know it.

I don't know how you usually listen to the Eucharistic Prayer. Ideally, you pray it with the celebrant, and I have found I do that best with eyes closed. Listen and pray the words, and be transported onto the mountain, into the cloud. Stay in the cloud as you come up to receive the Lord's body and blood. Then you will be ready to re-enter the world, going forth in the power of the Spirit.

Like Peter, we don't get to stay on the mountain; but also like him, we get to take the mountain with us.

Amen.