

A Beautiful View

Matthew 17.1- 9

Re. Bill Crawford

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

Transfiguration Sunday

March 6, 2011

Here is a mountaintop experience ...this the Gospel passage is the story of the Transfiguration of the Lord. In it, Jesus is transfigured and radiant. We are reading today from Matthew, but we find this puzzling, amazing scene and story in the three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke: so called as each of these three presents a synopsis of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus ascends a mountaintop somewhere north of the Sea of Galilee. We don't know exactly which mountaintop there in the north of Israel. Some suggest that it might be Mt. Tabor. Some biblical scholars say this could be the very hilltop on which Jesus is tempted by the devil. Looking ahead, the temptation is the episode heard throughout the Christian Church at the beginning of Lent, as we will hear it next Sunday. The transfiguration account is that passage which marks the conclusion of the season of Epiphany (as we do today), and the next step to Lent.

The disciple Peter was with Jesus on that climb up the mountain. Peter along with James and John. Up ahead in time, Jesus asks these same 3 to remain with him while he prays in the garden of Gethsemane. All three -- Peter, James and John -- were major figures in the early church. Peter is the one who speaks up right away and launches into a proposal.

It sounds like a building and grounds/development committee presentation. Upon witnessing the sight of Jesus, along with Moses and Elijah in conversation, Peter proclaims to Jesus: "It is good for us to be here. Let's stay here. At least let us make a booth, a pavilion of sorts, for you and Moses and Elijah."

In those moments, there came a cloud, overshadowing them, and a voice, a voice reminiscent of the voice heard at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him." And that's the last we hear of the building plans. Jesus is called into the valley, down the mountain, along the pathways of our humanity.

That mountaintop experience is incredible. It is as strange a scene as you will find in the Gospels. It is a glimpse of something glorious, a beautiful view. Moses likely represents the law. Elijah represents the prophets. Thus appearing with these two, the law and the prophets, Jesus is in distinct relationship with all of scripture, as it – that scripture – preceded his coming.

The Gospel account – particularly in Matthew -- present the Hebrew scripture and tradition coming together in Christ. Then we see that their discussion – Jesus with Elijah and Moses -- is about departure.

Luke is the only Gospel to actually describe the discussion among Jesus, Moses and Elijah. The text in Luke 9 reads: “They were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The Greek word here in the New Testament – the word for *departure* is *exodus* or going out. The word reminds us of the saving acts . . . of Moses leading the Jews out of Egypt. And calling attention to Christ leading the people out of sin and death. This *exodus*, the departure from all that would entrap us, that is the nature of Jesus’ calling, and Jesus’ calling to us.

The mountaintop experience is not for long. Peter wants to capture that moment; he would like for time to stand still. It’s a sight to behold. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are radiant. The disciples James and John are in awe. Peter is awestruck too.

But Peter is compelled to construct booths by which to memorialize and contain and conserve what we have here. Peter, in the days to come, will get his chance to build something – as Jesus pronounces him “the rock” upon which the church will come to be built. But it won’t be the memorial structure on the mountaintop.

Here in present times and places, the Church is indeed blessed with our structures, our buildings and grounds. To be sure, those blessings here at LAC are splendid. Behold this beautiful space.

A basic survey of churches around Westchester and New York City, and a close look at their operating budgets --- Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist -- finds that at least 1/3 to 1/2 of church budgets are devoted to buildings and grounds and their necessary upkeep and maintenance, utilities, insurance, etc.

If I may, that leads to a spiritual exercise to which I invite you as a church family – a building and grounds committee of the whole, if you will. Imagine for a moment . . . Imagine the church without the property we have. What then would we do with what is available in resources? What would be freed up in us and for us in our ministry and service? How would we be? And what would we be doing? As a church?

Mind you, this is a spiritual exercise. This is not a plan; I’m just preaching here.

But what might your sense be of that vision? Where edifice and structure are not dominant or ends in themselves, but vessels and vehicles for ministry? Actually, we have seen that vision here and at other churches’ in great times of vitality and growth.

You can see that action of ministry – without the edifice -- where Christianity is growing the fastest in other parts of the world right now. Churches without buildings. Imagine. You can see that also right here in the earliest days of the Larchmont Avenue Church when the community was gathering in the time between the church’s founding in 1914 and the completing of this great sanctuary fifteen years later. What would we do with what we have, aside from bricks and mortar and the edifice that we have . . . to realize Christ and the community of faith, the Good News one to another?

Peter is enthusiastic in those moments there on the mountaintop. He wants to build something by which to contain what he sees and to which he pays homage. Jesus is beyond that. Jesus is not on the ascent to something structured and structural. But Jesus is on the descent into the valley below, into the depth of our humanity: renewing life, confronting power with truth, and restoring life with hope.

There is no structure able to contain such life force and love, such grace. Not that we could not build something special; and we have. But that memorial is living and alive, radiant and lose in the world, as Christ is present among us. It is in us when we realize Christ's love for us, and know it and, reach out with it. In our reverence for life, and all in the creation about us. . . We are called not to so much to build, but to be that memorial, that living memorial.

Jesus walks out of Peter's would-be building and grounds committee. It seems that many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers. Peter, at this point seems to be one of them. The construction agenda is dissolved; but the direction ahead is clear, as Jesus leads them down from the mountain into the valley.

From the mountaintop, Jesus' journey to Jerusalem begins, on the way to Calvary another hilltop. Arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus rails against those who would turn the building, God's Temple, God's house, into a market place. And Jesus talks on about how the Temple will come to ruins in three days time. Rather, the temple of the human heart is his focus: our souls and their salvation. The targeted construction is the way of love in our lives and saving grace is his purpose.

Let that be the way of our journey – knowing the salvation and hope of such love in Christ, in this season and going forward.

Finally, the mountain of the Transfiguration is no more the exclusive presence of God than is the hill of Calvary on which Jesus died. On both God is present and revealed. With Calvary, Christ is lifted up. And even then, his rising is not so much to heavenly heights on mountaintops, but to the very heart of our humanity: there is Christ: known to us the breaking of bread, in the restoring of life, in the compassion and love for which God made us to be.

There is Christ: down from the mountaintop, and across the valleys, with us, into our lives. Always. Amen.

Notes . . . Peter the disciple is there with Jesus. And I suppose that if the Apostle Peter has his way we would know for sure just what mountain that was: Its location and vital statistics, height, terrain, ski conditions, etc. It's a stretch, but before long, if Peter were with us, we might see bumper stickers on cars that said: "This car climbed Mt. Transfiguration."