

It's Good to Be Here

I'd like to begin this time together by inviting you—in your imagination—to do a bit of time traveling. To travel backward in time. To the times of *your* life. In the recesses of memory, sometimes past events come into sharper focus if you close your eyes. So you can do that if you like

First: Remember your graduation day? Remember how you felt that day? Remember that wonderful, free-at-last, on-top-of-the-world feeling? Your years in school were behind you. But your future hadn't yet begun.

Next—if you've ever been married—recall your wedding day. As you looked into the eyes of the one to whom you were making solemn vows, could you feel tears welling up? Could you feel your heart pounding? You were no longer a single person, but married life still lay ahead of you.

Then, for many of you, came that memorable day when you or your spouse went into labor and then into the delivery room. Long months of expectant waiting had come to an end. But you hadn't yet embarked on the adventure of being a parent.

We think of these times as milestones. High moments. Unforgettable moments. And they are! But they are also transitions. Something has ended. Something else has not yet begun. You've left the place where you were. But you've not yet set out for the place where you are going. You are neither here nor there. You're making a transition. You're in an in-between place.

That's the kind of place to which Peter and James and John, the inner circle of Jesus' first disciples, have been led in today's reading from Mark's Gospel. This place is different from their everyday world of dusty roads and hurried meals and the press and stress of huge crowds. It's a place far removed from what they've been experiencing with their Teacher. It's a place where clear, clean, cool, crisp air fills the lungs. This place is a respite. An in-between place.

But not only is this a place between where they've been and where they're going. It's also a place between heaven and earth. The mountaintop is one of those "thin places" where the gap between heaven and earth narrows. A place where the veil between us human creatures and our God is—for a time—pulled back. A place where time is eclipsed and the familiar is swallowed up into the transcendent.

For Mark tells us that on this high mountain, Jesus is *transfigured before them*. Profoundly changed in appearance. Now Peter and James and John have been with Jesus for a good while. They've traveled through Galilee with him. They've seen him hungry and tired, excited and delighted, frustrated and discouraged. They've seen him do most of the things an ordinary man does. They've seen his humanness.

But today they see him in a radically different way. Transformed. Shining. Shimmering with unearthly brilliance beyond the power of language to portray. Appearing with Moses and Elijah as the One who fulfills both Law and prophecy. Awe and amazement overcome. Even Peter.

Now you know that Peter is the spokesman of the twelve. You know he's always got *something* to say. But on the mountain, words fail, as Peter can only mutter: *Rabbi, it's good to be here*.

It *is* good to be here on this mountain where Mark takes us today. But we citizens of the twenty-first century are products of the age of reason. We expect our environment to be orderly and predictable and structured. We expect to find—in fact, sometimes we *insist* on finding—a rational explanation for everything that happens. For phenomena that we've never before experienced.

In a story shared by Bishop Will Willimon, an “old farmer traveled from the country for his first trip to the zoo. There he encountered, for the first time, a giraffe. For nearly an hour, he gazed upon the strange beast. Finally he said, ‘No, I just don’t believe it.’

It is tough for us to see a world that we have not yet lived in. Seeing, recognition, is difficult within our present frame of perception. A vision, a gift is needed in order to see that which we don’t expect to see.”

The mountaintop is where you and I are offered this gift. Being on the mountaintop makes us more than who we were before. On the mountaintop, we grow. On the mountaintop, we become less skeptical and more attuned to mystery. On the mountaintop, we discover that there are more realities in heaven and on earth than we can wrap our scientifically-conditioned minds around—and the fact that we *can’t* wrap our minds around them makes them no less real. The mountaintop is that place of discernment where consciousness expands and marvels. The mountaintop is where the miraculous draws near and becomes possible.

It is good to be here. Here we see what the readings in this season after the Epiphany have been building toward, since with the Māgi we first saw Jesus in the faint light of a star. With each passing week, we've learned more about him. Seen him more clearly.

But today on the mountain, this time of epiphanies climaxes in a vision of the full, radiant splendor of the Son of God. Today we see—and hear—who Jesus truly is. For us—for the church—this is an in-between time. A set-apart time. A turning point time. Because after today, we'll begin moving with Jesus in a new and different direction.

For today we hear a voice. On the mountain, a voice from an overshadowing cloud. The very voice heard at the baptism of Jesus. A divine voice commanding Peter, James, John—and us—to *listen* to the Beloved Son. And what we all are to listen to has a particular context.

It's this: Just a few days before this time on the mountaintop, in the gospel narrative, *Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*

My sisters and brothers, there's a connection here. These words of Jesus resonate in the command given on the mountain, the command given to ensure that we hear and heed these words of Jesus.

Jesus, who is transfigured. Is it possible—just possible—that this One we glimpse today is the Christ revealed as he has been since before time began? This transfigured One who is now and always will be God-with-us, until time is no more?

Could it just be possible that Peter, James, John—and each one of us—are being transfigured as well? Could it be that in this in-between time *we* are being changed? Could it be that we are being given new eyes to see the One who has been there all along, but whom we have been unable to perceive?

Now that we see, we don't want the encounter to end. It's a high moment. Like Peter who wants to build dwellings, we want to live in this moment, prolong it, hold onto it. *It's good to be here.* We want to stay.

But that's not possible. The mountain of transfiguration is the place where we receive the understanding and the courage and the strength to face what lies ahead. To face what Jesus has *told* us lies ahead.

Mountaintop experiences don't last long. Soon, Peter and James and John will have to follow Jesus down the mountain. But they'll never forget what happened *on* the mountain.

And neither will we. This week, you and I have to follow Jesus down the mountain, too. Beginning this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we set out on a journey with Jesus. Along a road that leads to a cruel cross.

As Laura Mendenhall puts it, "The story of God's people is a story of climbing up into the presence of God's glory and then having to go down into the reality of life's pain." But we are a people who hope in the One who has promised us a place of *no more* pain.

And so, beloved, just for today, it is good for us to be here. Today we catch a vision of our risen Lord, who invites us into life in the resurrection. Life that has no end!

It's so good to be here where our eyes are being opened to see the wondrous *light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. And what can we do but worship him with reverence, with thanksgiving, and with joy?

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