

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 21-22, 2009
Mark 9: 2-9

“Going Up to Come Down”

Recently I had the privilege of traveling to Scottsdale, Arizona, for a prayer retreat with the Pastoral Leadership Institute. The setting for the retreat was the Franciscan Renewal Center, a beautiful place in the desert southwest for prayer, reflection, and solitude. I was richly blessed through this time away. While there on the retreat, one afternoon my fellow pastors and I did some hiking up into the nearby mountains. I never did find out what the name of this mountain range was. I kept asking the locals, and they all said the same thing: “Hmmm... you know I really don’t know.” Anyway, there is something exhilarating about going up a mountain height and seeing everything spread out below; it helps give perspective to things. And that is exactly what today is all about: going up a mountain with Peter, James, and John, following Jesus. And there on that mountain top we have the great privilege of viewing Jesus in his transfigured glory, flanked by those towering figures from the Old Testament: Moses the Lawgiver and Elijah the prophet. There on that mountaintop, we are given a perspective on things: who Jesus is, where he is going, and what this means for us. Jesus goes up in order to come back down again. On this Transfiguration Sunday, that is the theme for today’s message: “Going Up to Come Down.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The transfiguration is a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. From here on out he resolutely sets his face to go toward Jerusalem, and all that awaits him there: rejection by the religious leaders, betrayal by one of his own, suffering, an agonizing death by crucifixion, and ultimately resurrection. Jesus sets his face to go *up* to Jerusalem. When the Scriptures talk about this going up to Jerusalem, they aren’t kidding; it is set high up in the central highlands of the eastern Mediterranean. Jesus goes up the mount of transfiguration in order to come back down. His mission is not to stay lofty and removed from people. Remember, Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us, not God-above-us. Despite Peter’s desire – and maybe ours as well – to hold onto this mountaintop experience and just stay up there, that is not what Jesus came to do. He came on a rescue mission, and the object of his rescue is people – you and me, everyone. In order to accomplish that rescue mission, Jesus had to come back down that mount of transfiguration and then make his way back up to Jerusalem to another mountain, Mount Calvary, Golgotha. As Jesus goes up to Jerusalem, to certain suffering and death, the glory of his transfiguration is a precursor, a sneak preview, of the glory of Jesus’ coming resurrection on that first Easter morning. But between the two is the cross.

Throughout the Scriptures, God often chooses to reveal himself upon a mountain: think of Moses and the burning bush at Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3), the covenant God made with his people at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-20), God speaking to Elijah on the mountain, not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in a “still small voice” (1 Kings 19). With Jesus’ transfiguration, God is again revealing himself, and again it is on a mountain top. The point here is if we want to behold the glory of the Lord, we need look no further than Jesus. The Gospel for Christmas Day closes with these words: **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,; and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth”** (John 1:14). Jesus is the glory of the Lord, as Paul tells us in today’s Second Reading: **“For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”** (2 Corinthians 4:6). Jesus’ transfigured glory on that mountain top will give way to a different kind of glory on another

mountain top – a suffering servant kind of glory on Mt. Calvary where Jesus pours out his lifeblood as payment for our sins. Jesus goes up the Mount of Transfiguration and then comes back down again to take on himself all the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do – our sins of commission and our sins of omission; to do the impossible for us: sacrifice himself in our behalf. That is the glory of Christ on Mount Calvary's cross.

Today Jesus invites us to come up to him – not on a mountain, but here at his altar. He invites us, though we are not worthy, to come to him and receive the gifts of his very Body and Blood which were given and shed on the cross of Mount Calvary. He invites us to come and behold his glory; to hold in our hands and taste in our mouths the glory of his salvation. And here at his altar, we are given a mountain top experience, a faith-strengthening experience, in this blessed Communion as our transfigured Lord, our crucified and risen Savior, comes to us under bread and wine with forgiveness, life, and salvation.

It is always tempting to stay on the mountain top and hold on to that very special experience. But we follow Jesus who came back down the mountain and faced what was before him. As we come down the mountain, as we leave the Lord's altar, we go back into the world – back to our homes, offices, and schools, back to our joys and frustrations, back to our challenges and uncertainties, trusting that the Lord Jesus who is with us on the mountain top is with us also in the valley; trusting that he will guide and direct our lives for his glory and for our good; trusting that the Lord Jesus will work in us to be a blessing to others. We go up in order to come down.

May the glory of our transfigured Savior be our strength and our joy as we come down the mountain. Amen.