

Last Sunday after Epiphany
March 2, 2025

Sermon by Rev. Steve Seibert

Sermon based on Luke 9:28-43a

Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. Jesus prays at times of discernment and after times when he has been among the people, teaching and healing. Jesus prayed at his baptism; *Jesus prayed after healing the man with leprosy and crowds came to him*; Jesus prayed before feeding of the 5000; *Jesus prayed before he asked the disciples who the people thought he was and when Peter then identified him as the Messiah*; Jesus prayed before he told the disciples that he would be tortured and killed, and yet be raised on the third day, and what they could expect if they threw in with him, giving up their lives for his sake. Stating the obvious here, this is Jesus, the one who is both God and man, and for him, prayer is woven into his life.

And so Jesus takes the three on a hike, up Mount Tabor. Today, most people travel up Mount Tabor by car or van. No question, hiking it would be fairly rigorous. While Mount Tabor is not spectacularly high, the view looking out is impressive and beautiful. There is this sense that you are removed from the land below; you are set apart. I am thinking that this journey has a definite sense of being a retreat, the four of them have stopped at points on their journey to appreciate the beauty.

What did they talk about on their hike? God knows, but let's make a stab!

Jesus, you are the Messiah, and we are looking forward to the earthly and spiritual restoration of Israel. We are so tired of being under the thumb of the Romans.

You know, Lord, I've seen the way the priests and the Sadducees look at you when you are answering their questions. I know they are our religious leaders but I what I see in their eyes is hate.

Jesus, I can't believe the joy on the widow's face in Nain when you restored her son to life. The townspeople looked at you with a mixture of awe, deep admiration and love.

I doubt that they could sense what was about to happen when they were up on the mountain. I wonder, did Jesus have some sense that he was about to have an encounter with Moses and Elijah? Perhaps a stirring deep in his spirit?

But...they have journeyed to pray. Jesus has recently given them the tough teaching of loving your enemy. This is his call to them and it is no less his call to us. When Jesus prayed, did he pray for his accusers, tormentors and those who would ultimately kill him in Jerusalem? Did Moses and Elijah come to him in the middle of that prayer? I know, unanswerable questions.

Peter, James and John have fought through sleep; now they see Jesus, Moses and Elijah in glory. They hear them discussing Jesus' departure which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. They are good Jews, knowing that Moses stands for the law, Elijah the prophets. Jesus is the Messiah. Peter knows this is a profound moment. Like all of us, he wants to make this last, if not forever, then for as long as possible. He offers to build three dwellings. Yet almost immediately, they are overshadowed by a cloud, receiving the command, **This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him.**

Jesus, Peter, James and John come down... "on the next day", and almost immediately, a man whose only child is possessed by a demon comes to Jesus. Jesus and the three have come down from the mountain top; the call to heal the hurting and to love those on the margins is immediate. **Jesus rebuked the spirit, healed the boy, and gave him to his father.**

When God gives us a such a gift as Peter, James and John received – this is never meant to be held close, thought about, then kept to ourselves. We are to take the gift, to grow it within ourselves and then to share it, to shed it abroad. Such a gift both changes and strengthens us as we minister to others. How many times did Peter, James and John draw strength from this experience on the journey to Jesus crucifixion and in their post-resurrection proclaiming of the Good News?

In the gospels, this event is called The Transfiguration, that is, Jesus is trans-figured. Jesus is changed. Priest and poet Malcolm Guite, however, interprets this event differently. Rather than Peter, James and John seeing a changed Jesus, Guite believes they are given a view of Jesus as Jesus truly is, the light of the world. They are not seeing Jesus changed, but rather they seeing Jesus - revealed. Let me share a few lines from his poem:

*For that one moment, 'in and out of time',
On that one mountain where all moments meet,
The love that dances at the heart of things
Shone out upon us from a human face
And to that light the light in us leaped up,
We felt it quicken somewhere deep within,
A sudden blaze of long-extinguished hope
Trembled and tingled through tender skin.*

Today we mark this last Sunday of Epiphany. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. The word lent comes from the middle English word *lente*, which means springtime. And though spring is more muted in Florida than in more northern climates, we know it is a time of rebirth. On Ash Wednesday, we will pray Psalm 51. We will pray

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. That word for create is used only one other time in the Bible, when God created the world! On Ash Wednesday, we will be marked with ashes as a sign of our mortality as well as a sign of our repentance. That mark on our forehead will be the sign of the cross. I love each of you, members of this beloved community, but I know that you and I have done things that separate us from God and each other. I call you to a holy lent, beginning with Ash Wednesday. In the words of Scott Gunn, *“Please consider inviting a friend to join you on Ash Wednesday or Maundy Thursday. As we are transformed by our encounter with Jesus in this season, let us not hoard this gift. It’s too good not to share.”*

The Parish Enrichment Committee is offering a wonderful lenten devotional this year, “Coming Back to Life”. You can use this at home or you can join a small group gathering on Sunday evenings at 6pm (beginning tonight) or on Wednesdays at 3pm here on campus . These booklets and a sign-up sheet will be available as you leave church. If you choose to join one of the groups, it is okay if you cannot make all the gatherings. I encourage you to consider joining one of these small groups. Powerful things can happen in such a setting.

Also on that table is a card with our Lenten schedule and two prayers that you can use on a daily basis. As we reflect back on how vital prayer was for Jesus, we can draw closer to God through prayer. There are two prayers which readers of Forward: Day by Day will recognize.

On Wednesdays, starting next week on March 12, at 4pm we will walk the Way of the Cross, also known as Stations of the Cross. Tradition holds that Mary, the mother of Jesus, set up stone markers outside her home outside Jerusalem to prayerfully retrace the steps of her son’s passion. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernadone, known to us as Francis of Assisi and his Franciscan friars, walked the stations. The Daughters of the King will lead us once again. So, we have the opportunity to walk a devotional that the mother of Jesus started, led here at St. Cyprian’s by daughters of Jesus.

Lent is a season given to us to help us to assess our lives, to deepen our love of and our relationship with God. While these words of Frederick Buechner are always good, they seem particularly apropos for Lent. *If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and a preacher it would be this: Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than in*

the excitement and gladness: touch, taste and smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.

Jesus is inviting you to go up on the mountain to pray with him before he sets his face towards Jerusalem and his passion, death and resurrection. Will you go with him?