

The 9th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 6, 2017

Proper 13: Luke 9:28-16: *Walking Down Into The Valley With Jesus.*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

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

In the spring of 1978, I was in the Navy on a NATO deployment in the Mediterranean Sea with the 6th fleet. The ship anchored off the ancient City of Naples, Italy. We had a priest named Fr. Joe riding our ship and the order to which he belonged had a house in Rome. He asked me if I would like to go with him to the order's mother house and then go on a tour of Vatican City. The very first place we went to was the Sistine Chapel to see Michelangelo's masterpiece ceiling paintings. At a distance the paintings did not look all that impressive. People chattered and joked about a paint-by-number replica of Michelangelo's work for their own ceilings. However, when I drew closer and stood directly beneath each panel, I was overwhelmed. The paintings seemed to engulf me and everyone there. Everyone became quiet. Necks ached with the effort to keep looking up. Now we were seeing the paintings as

Michelangelo intended for them to be seen. For me, the impact was unforgettable. However, I noticed flies crawling across the ceiling paintings. I thought, "What a shame. Those flies are right up there where I would love to be. Those flies are right on top of the greatest masterpiece of all time, but they just can't see it. Then, Fr. Joe said, we are like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. We cannot see God and the angels lying beneath the threshold of our senses. We live our lives like flies on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with no awareness that there is anything great here.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, our reading from Luke's gospel is like a series of magnificent paintings. The setting for each of the paintings is a mountaintop. In the first painting, we see Jesus and his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John. Jesus is praying. The disciples are sleeping.

In the second, we see the result of Jesus' prayer. The appearance of his face is changed, and his clothes are as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appear with him. Peter and his companions, once asleep, are now wide awake. Peter is saying to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." Luke tells us that poor ole Peter does not know what he was saying.

In the third painting a cloud has appeared and enveloped these men. The disciples, hidden by the cloud, are afraid. A voice is coming from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!"

In the final painting the voice is now silent, the cloud is gone and so are Moses and Elijah. Jesus and his three disciples are alone once more. But there is a strange and mysterious look on the disciples' faces. Luke tells us, "And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen."

So my sisters and brothers, how shall we deal with these four memorable paintings from the Mount of the Transfiguration? Shall we but peruse them briefly and marvel at the hand of the artist and then move on to other notable paintings and art with no thought to what the artist is trying to say? Worse, shall we be like flies on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel who see such works of art as momentary resting places, but have no powers to discern their ultimate worth? Or shall we look for some deeper meaning some relevant truth about our lives and about our destinies?

Actually, the entire essence of our Christian faith is wrapped up in these four paintings. They speak to the very heart of everything we believe about life, about God and about our reason for being. They say that there is more to reality than what we can hear, see, touch, taste or smell. This experience on

the Mount of Transfiguration was no ordinary mountaintop experience. It was not simply a matter of Peter, James and John being moved by the beauty of creation. Oh, how we all cherish those beautiful mountain top experiences of our lives to be sure. We want to stay and linger as long as we can, but eventually we move on.

In the German classic, Faust, Goethe describes a pact that Dr. Faust makes with the devil. The pact allows Faust to satisfy his every human want and desire except one. Never, never under any circumstances, is he ever to stop and say to the passing moment, "Wait, you are so beautiful!"

My brothers and sisters, I find God's world and creations to be beautiful, intricate and so perfect. Just think, scientists tell us that the slant of the earth tilted at an angle of 23 degrees, produces our seasons. If the earth had not been tilted exactly as it is, vapors from the oceans would move both north and south, piling up continents of ice. If the moon were only 50,000 miles away from earth, instead of 200,000 miles away, the tides might be so enormous that all the continents would be submerged in water. If the crust of the earth had been only ten feet thicker, there would be no oxygen, and without it all animal life would die and on and on the story of creation goes. This world is mystical, magical and absolutely magnificent. It overwhelms our senses to contemplate

the glory of creation. However, the Mount of Transfiguration says to us that when we take the sum total of every beautiful and wonderful thing that we have ever experienced through our five senses; when we add up every good feeling we have ever had about, family, spouses, loved ones, friends, health and hope when we include everything this world has to offer us for happiness, joy and peace, there is still more. There is a reality that our scientific instruments cannot measure, our best philosophical minds cannot fathom; our most sophisticated rockets cannot reach. It is the realm of the spiritual. It is the reality of the living God. There is more to reality than what our senses can detect and my sisters and brothers in Christ, there is more to living than dying. What sad, meaningless lives most people in our secular world live. We can hear it in the fractured rhetoric of debate that goes on in Washington about the great issues of our time. Never is the question raised about ultimate values, the will of God, or eternal consequences. Why? Because most people live with the expectation that life really does end at the grave.

For the Christian, however, there is a more pressing issue. Death has been defeated! There on the Mount of Transfiguration the disciples see Jesus and Moses and Elijah. How long had Moses and Elijah been dead? Five hundred years, a thousand? No matter. In the spiritual realm there is no measure of

time. "God is the God of the living," Jesus proclaimed. There is more to living than dying. There is more to life than our senses can detect.

My sisters and brothers, there is one thing more to be said from these paintings. There is more to Christian commitment than going to the mountaintop. There should be a fifth painting of the Transfiguration experience. It would show Jesus and the three disciples coming down from the mountain and into the valley ministering to the needs of people. Followers of Jesus who believe there is a spiritual realm and who believe that death has been defeated are not given the luxury of twiddling their thumbs and idly reveling in those great truths. We are called to walk down the mountain and to seek out the poor, the sick, the tired, the depressed, the oppressed and all those who hunger and thirst in body, mind and spirit, the homeless, the addicted, the imprisoned, to the least and the lowest and minister to them in Jesus' name. Does the Transfiguration motivate you to reach out to your neighbor? Does the Transfiguration motivate you to reach down to the least and the lowliest? Does the Transfiguration motivate you to sign up to serve the evening meal at the New Bedford Salvation Army Soup Kitchen on next Sunday August 13 from 4:30-6 PM? There is no staying on the mountaintop for those who love Jesus. Jesus always calls us to go down to the valley.

So, here is the challenging question for this week, my dear sisters and brothers, how about you? How do you feel about these portraits that Luke has given us of Christ's transfiguration? Are you like the art critic who views them with cool detachment and moves on? Worse still, are you like a fly on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel with no awareness that there is anything great here? Or, are you ready to leave the mountain walking down to the valley with Jesus by your side into eternity, into victory and into God's glory.

Amen!