

Last Epiphany B
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AJH+

*“Suddenly, when [the disciples] looked around,
they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.”*

Some preachers recycle previous sermons. I’m not typically one of them and neither am I casting judgement about the practice, just seeking to name a known fact in the clergy community. A sermon is a living, breathing document, enlivened by a congregation, so even the same text, offered in different locations, at different times, with different concerns, can be interpreted entirely differently.

As a priest who has been through the lectionary a few times now, I find myself returning to old sermons, not to recycle them but to ponder what inspiration I received in a previous wrestling with a text, and, sometimes, to marvel at how different, or similar, our context is here and now.

This week, I decided it might be fun to take a look at last year’s sermon offered in the final week in the season of Epiphany, the last Sunday before we begin the journey in Lent. After all, though we read from different Gospels each year, the final Sunday before Ash Wednesday always features the same event, Jesus’ transfiguration before the eyes of his closest disciples, Peter, James, John.

Last year, I was particularly inspired by the setting, a mountaintop. Jesus and his disciples ascended a hill, something we mountain folk know much about. I attempted to make connections between our own setting in Blowing Rock, at a summit overlooking the valleys below, and our own nearness to God who has long been encountered among the hills.

And, in so doing, I shied away from the conclusion of the text, when Jesus and his dear friends depart the Mount of Transfiguration to return to the valley, with the others. We lingered together, homiletically at least, on top of the mountain.

Little did we know, however, that we, too, were to be plunged into a type of valley only a few short weeks later. Only two weeks of our Lenten observance would take place while being physically together. Within days, the shadows of a new valley would draw near, and the light of the mountaintop seem distant.

We often find ourselves there, in the valleys of life, if we are being honest, I believe. So it was for Jesus and his disciples. Their time on the crest of that ridge was limited. The Transfiguration event, so wondrously described by the Gospel writers, does not appear to have lasted all that long.

“Suddenly,” Mark tells us readers, “when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.” No sooner than it began it seems as though this divine mountaintop experience of sacred light and divine voice came to its conclusion. Minutes, maybe; hours in all. Likely before the disciples even realized it, before they even began to process what had taken place, they were travelling with Jesus back down the path from the pinnacle.

To the valleys below, to the friends who remained there, to the mundane rhythms of everyday life that summoned them.

There, in the valley below, the rigors of their ministry calls them – no sooner than they emerge from the crest of the ridge, a crowd will gather round them, curious, no doubt, about the stunned faces of these who have been in the presence of the Almighty. And, from that crowd, a little boy, convulsing from the possession of a demon, will be brought forward, healed, and set free.

While we often make much of these mountaintop moments that bookend and center the life of our Lord – Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, the events of the Mountain of Transfiguration, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the scene I just described, the moments that follow the Transfiguration, is so much more the reality of Jesus' ministry with his disciples, a ministry among the valleys.

In the valleys of the desert wilderness, Jesus wrestled with evil and proclaimed divine life. In the valleys of the Galilee, Jesus touches the unclean, sits with the sinner, heals the brokenhearted, and frees the captive. In a valley across from the Temple mount, Jesus will struggle with the reality of his identity in a garden called Gethsemane.

Jesus knows the valleys of life, our life, because he lived among them.

On this final Sunday before our Lenten journey begins, as we are bid pause to remember the divine light of the mount of Transfiguration, let us not be tempted to think that the presence of the Holy One is limited to such places of height and hype. Amidst the valleys of our life, the simple disappointments and the profound fears, God is there, present, abiding in hope.

The Transfiguration moment, was for the disciples and is for us, a reminder and a revelation of God's light which cannot be contained, of Christ's light which goes ever with us, of Spirit light that will not be extinguished, even when such moments of holy nearness seem too distant.

“Suddenly, when [the disciples] looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus.”

On the heights of hills, in the depths of valleys, may we see only Jesus, the Beloved of God, who is there, all along. Amen.