

“Changes In Altitude”
EpiphanyC-06 – February 14, 2010

Preaching Text: *“And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” (Luke 9:29)*

With all the snow in December and what seems a colder than usual winter, I’ve found myself saying to people, “I like winter...until I don’t.” Which, I suppose, is another way of saying I like all four seasons.

But I do reach a point every winter when I’m ready for a change. And, frankly, we’re getting pretty close to that now.

Which is why, if I had my druthers, I’d get away in March. I’d go south, to the sunshine and warm temperatures, to the lush vegetation and soft, gentle breezes.

Upon my return, or so the logic goes, I would *ease* into spring, having had a satisfying foretaste of it. Bolstered by an assured future of sun and warmth, I would tolerate nature’s slow creep from arctic to balmy, would pace myself purposefully through the dark, chilly, seemingly endless wind-swept rains of spring.

With anxious longing for sun-drenched days duly satisfied, I would cope patiently, accepting whatever Mother Nature has in store, ever-alert to what exists just beyond the horizon.

This same sort of logic, I suppose, might be applied to the Transfiguration. For in it Jesus and the disciples are given a glimpse of what is yet to be – the ecstasy and brilliance of God’s fullness – though they still must make the arduous trip down the mountain and to the awaiting cross, beyond which, alone, is glory.

In both cases, though vastly unequal in importance, the euphoria of journey’s end is felt at its start. And such euphoria serves to encourage and sustain the traveler, providing vision and purpose useful in confronting the inevitable challenges, hardships and setbacks standing between start and finish. This glimpse of glory effectively illumines the path leading to the attainment of the goal at the end of the road.

Of course, these moments of insight and clarity, moments, as scripture defines it, when the “veil” hiding God is lifted, come not just at the start of any endeavor, but can happen at any time. God’s revelation, God’s in-breaking, in other words, is not bound by time.

Nonetheless, these moments of clarity and grace do come our way, often, it seems, as we embark on a new journey.

There is a recognized phenomenon in Alcoholics Anonymous where people experience a kind of euphoria when first joining the program. Sudden insight into past behaviors, behaviors now seen in a wholly different light, as if through a new lens, produce feelings of exaltation, as the individual comes to better understand their disease and to formulate helpful strategies to combat it.

In addition, the problem, once hidden, assumes newfound urgency as others, previously kept at bay, are drawn into the mix. Encouragement and attentive care becomes the order of the day. The overall experience is one of immense joy and relief, as the recovering alcoholic as well as family and friends unite in celebrating this heartening step toward healing and wholeness. A “high” inevitably ensues.

But then the novelty begins to wear off. The mountaintop “high” fades. The sounds of well-wishes grow faint. Back down in the valley of struggle and hardship, those ‘on the way’ to sobriety and new life find their days a bit stunted, confused, bewildering. The daily slog replaces the clarity and repose of good intentions and heartfelt convictions. The proverbial curtain has come hurtling down, the veil clouding and obscuring clear vision and purpose.

Recovering alcoholics will tell you that this effort to move forward often results in two steps back. Traveling now through unknown territory, amid unfamiliar scenery, and absent the requisite skills to navigate effectively, the recovering alcoholic hesitates, stumbles.

In time, like the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, in the aftermath of the Exodus, the recovering alcoholic, too, wishes to return to Egypt, to escape by going back, to a place known at least. Like an old shoe with holes in its soles, it offers familiarity and comfort, despite its obvious, glaring deficiencies.

It is at times like these we need to recall the mountaintop experiences. When our vision falters, as it will, and when disappointments and failings overwhelm, as they often do, it is imperative that we remember clearly why we started down this path in the first place, that we might remain steadfast and purposeful.

In moments of despair, amid the unavoidable confusions and seemingly random exigencies of everyday life, we would do well to keep our “eyes on the prize,” a phrase used by the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-Sixties, a phrase that served to encourage those struggling to the end racial discrimination amidst abuse, hatred, even murder, to stay the course, to never forget why they were doing what they were doing, that it would be worth it in the end.

Beginning on Wednesday, we Christians begin the season of Lent by walking symbolically down the mountain, that traditional place in scripture where humans meet God, to begin our step-by-step journey to Golgotha and the cross.

Though this season, the poor step-sister of our liturgical year, is not generally welcomed, it offers rich opportunities for spiritual growth.

It invites us to tackle the obstacles that prevent us from knowing greater joy, greater peace. It encourages us by offering God’s revelation of perfect love, that it may be our sole guide, a glimpse of the holy, the ineffable, that sustains us through the unavoidable challenges and hardships the Spirit empowers us to successfully overcome.

Once upon a time I thought it’d be great to be a pastor. I dreamed of working closely helping people with everyday life, preaching a message that would touch lives and experiencing the joy and peace promised to all who serve God faithfully.

Along the way, and on many occasions, that ideal has been put to the test. The daily slog can pull you away from seeing the greater purpose behind what you’re doing, while obscuring the One to whom it properly is directed.

This and the inevitable personal failings and trying moments make the ministerial calling, from time to time, seem confused, even purposeless, to the point where, as I’ve said half-jokingly, mowing the lawn seems preferable, for at least you can see what you’ve accomplished!

But time and time again, just as I feel most dragged down in the valley of confusion and hardship, something happens that reminds me of why God has called me to this work. And along with it is sufficient grace for the days of challenge ahead.

Lent, of course, concludes with Easter and the resurrection. But the Transfiguration offers a welcome foretaste of the glory God has in store for us on the other side of the valley, manifest fully in the cross, where the veil is lifted at last, even unto eternity. Amen.