

## Homily – February 25<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – Second Sunday of Lent



A few years ago, I had the privilege of being on Mount Tabor, the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration. While it was "good to be there," I have to admit, it was a little anticlimactic. It would have been wonderful if, on that day, the words of today's gospel would have come true where it says, ***"they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus."*** I didn't get to that personal

moment with Jesus alone, not even in my mind. What I got instead was a lot of pilgrims and tourists milling about and a canteen/gift shop doing a brisk business. That's what I got.

In my mind, I felt like a disciple searching out a long-bearded guru at the top of the mountain, so that I could ask the master an important question like, "Can you help me find Jesus?" to which the guru would reply, "You won't find him here because you didn't lose him here. You might want to go back down the mountain, back to the various arenas of your life, because you're more likely to find him down there rather than up here."

The guru, the master, would be none other than Jesus. He would be saying to me, "Go down the mountain and discover my presence in the hungry. I may be hungry for physical food or for a little bit of your time and attention, but I will be hungry. Feed me, come back up the mountain, and talk to me about what it was like. Go down the mountain and discover my presence in the thirsty. I may be thirsty for clean drinking water or for affection and love, but I will be thirsty. Quench my thirst, come back up the mountain, and talk to me about what it was like. Go down the mountain and discover my presence in the stranger. I may be the last person you want to welcome. Welcome me anyways, come back up the mountain, and talk to me about what it was like." Maybe the reason I didn't find Jesus on the mountain top in Jerusalem is because I didn't lose him there.

Peter was probably equally disappointed not to be able to pitch his tent and savor the experience of Jesus in his glorified state. I really do think this short-lived experience was a preview of a coming attraction. In many ways, I believe it was a glimpse of Jesus' resurrection given ahead of time in order to sustain them through some dark days that were quickly approaching. It's as if Jesus was saying to Peter, James, and John, "Remember what you saw on this *mountain*, but go and share the good news with the people in the *valley*." More than a privileged glimpse into eternal, resurrected life, the transfiguration is a mission.

Not only will Jesus not allow the Apostles Peter, James, and John to pitch tents and savor the moment, he also won't allow them to speak about it. He swears them to secrecy **until after the Son of Man has been risen from the dead**. (This is in Mark's gospel only. Every time Jesus does a miracle, he warns people not to talk about it. This is called the "Messianic secret." The inside joke is that Jesus cures a mute man and immediately tells the same man to "shut up!").

Peter, James, and John are not to keep the secret forever, but only until *after* the Son of Man has been risen from the dead. After Jesus is risen from the dead, they can blab all they want. What is death and resurrection? It's loss and renewal. Only once you've come through loss and been renewed on the other side, can you credibly speak about the whole experience. When you know the deep pain of struggle, loss, and even death, and have come out the other side, not bitter, not angry, not vindictive and not wanting to sue someone, you have earned the right to speak about it. Why? Because you know what you are talking about. Jesus wanted his apostles to talk from a place they had experienced themselves. If they were to talk too soon about what they experience on Mount Tabor, they would have no credibility. But if they first experience Jesus' pain, suffering, death and resurrection, their words would have greater power and credibility. It's no coincidence that it will be these very same three—Peter, James, and John—who will witness Jesus' suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. Gethsemane is where they learn to cut their teeth.

It seems you have to go through the pain of life and get on the other side of it before you can sincerely speak about it. You have to go down the mountain to the hungry, the thirsty, and encounter the stranger before you can speak of a love that conquers all hunger, thirst, and isolation. You can't imagine a new place until you've been there yourself. It's not the experience of struggle alone, but the

experience of struggle and the overcoming struggle that makes our lives trustworthy to others.

Mount Tabor may be like an older man having a chat with his son, whose in the midst of a marriage crisis. The old man might say something like this, "Son, I know you think your mom and I had a perfect marriage. Well, it wasn't. At the time, we didn't want to expose or burden you with stuff we needed to work out between the two of us. We were just like you, wondering if this was all worth it or if it was better we went our separate ways."

The son, baffled at this revelation, can only say, "Really. You and Mom almost split? I can't even imagine the both of you having an argument."

The father then goes on to share not only the struggle, but how, little by little, they got on the other side of the struggle and actually become a stronger couple. The father has credibility because he is willing to share a rough patch of his life and to leave his son with hope. Transfiguration is about descending the mountain, entering into the struggles of life, and being buoyed up by the hope of what you saw at the top of the mountain, and then, and only then, sharing it.

I have great respect for people who are in a 12-step program. They probably live with more brutal honesty than I do. For instance, alcoholics in the A.A. program never refer to themselves as "recovered alcoholics" but "recovering alcoholics." A recovering addict, regardless of their addiction, has been to the valley and has probably died a thousand deaths. Hopefully they can also witness to the glory of the resurrection, the glory of a better life. Although they never overcome the addiction, they have, nevertheless, come through to the place where the attachment to the addiction is under control. Jesus would not swear such a person to secrecy but invite them to share their story with as many people as possible.

I mention last weekend about how we all have a shadow side and we don't dare to pretend that it doesn't exist. If we think we don't have a shadow and are only filled with light, we become like the Pharisees, the "hypocrites" as Jesus called them, the only ones who refused to carry their shadow. Our shadow is necessary to keep us honest, firstly with ourselves and secondly with others. Similarly, the Transfiguration story says, "***Then a cloud overshadowed them.***" Darn it. A cloud in the middle of a perfectly glorious day. The cloud reminds us that wisdom comes

from both mountaintop glory and slugging it out in the valley. The cloud reminds us that we know and yet we don't know it all. The cloud reveals truths to us but reminds us that we don't have all the truth. The cloud humbly reminds us to keep our mouths shut until we've been through enough deaths and resurrections. Until then, we might do well to scratch our heads and continue questioning what this rising from the dead can mean for us.

~Fr. Phil