

February 3, 2008

Epiphany 4-The Transfiguration of Our Lord

“Listen to Him!”

Matthew 17:1-9

*And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." 5He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."*

Also referenced is the Epistle reading of 2 Peter 1:16-21

Sermon

I've been told a several times since I arrived in south Louisiana that I shouldn't rely on Mapquest to find my way around. For those of you unfamiliar with Mapquest, it is a site on the internet where you plug in the starting and ending addresses of a trip and it tells you the most efficient route to take to get to your destination. I use it a lot. But I've been warned about it from several folks. One person put it quite succinctly when he said, "But Mapquest isn't from around here."

I didn't listen. So last weekend when I was headed to Dulac to help take part in some hurricane recovery work with Bayou Grace I followed Mapquest's directions to take 315 out Bayou Dularge and cut over on Falgout Canal Road to Dulac. Mapquest told me to go straight on 315 onto Falgout Canal Road. Wrong. You have to turn left to get on Falgout Canal Road. I figured that out pretty quickly. Then I found out that Mapquest thinks Falgout Canal Road has something that it doesn't: a bridge. I didn't listen to those who were really in the know. I gave Mapquest preeminence and authority because, well, it's on the internet. And we all know that if it's on the internet it has to be true, right?

Today we celebrate the wonderful story of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ. This is the only time in Christ's earthly life that He is seen in His full divine and spectacular glory, and there are a lot of different aspects one could preach on. But in the text before us today, there is given us one clear and unmistakable message from God. *"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."*

We've heard the first part before. God uses the exact same words to announce Jesus as His son at Christ's baptism by John the Baptist. But something new is here. "Listen to Him." It seems somewhat of an odd thing for God to say. These are Jesus' disciples. They gave up their careers to follow Jesus and listen to Him preach and teach. It appears that they are already listening to Him. But are they really?

If you go back just eight verses we read of how Peter is not listening to Jesus. *“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’”* Then Jesus speaks of how to come after Him, a person must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow, and how the son of man will return in glory and judgment.

The next thing Matthew writes is today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus briefly undergoes this divinely dazzling metamorphosis and Peter, James and John see Him standing there with Moses and Elijah, two major heroes of the Jewish faith. Many theologians speculate that the conversation between them must have been regarding Jesus upcoming suffering and death in Jerusalem.

And then Peter, in his awestruck and panicked state, starts babbling, *“Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.”* Jesus has told them He must go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. Jesus, Moses and Elijah are standing there in glory presumably talking about Jesus’ going to Jerusalem and suffering and dying. Peter’s suggestion? “Let’s stay here!”

Matthew notes the fact that God acts while Peter is still talking. You kind of get the feeling that God has had just about enough of this deafness on the part of the disciples. It’s as if in frustration God rends the heaven’s apart, comes down in a bright cloud and shouts, “What, are you goofy??!! This is My beloved son with whom I am well pleased. LISTEN TO HIM!!!” (OK. The “What, are you goofy” part was mine. But you get the point.) And in the verses after this episode, maybe to drive the point home, Jesus again tells the disciples about His coming suffering, death and resurrection.

And we may chuckle at Peter’s ridiculous behavior, but you can’t really blame him. He couldn’t yet conceive of what would be accomplished by Christ in Jerusalem. But if Peter were around today looking at us, who would seem ridiculous?

We know what Jesus did on the cross. We know that He did suffer, die and rise again to eternal life. We know that not only He died, but that He died paying the punishment for all our sins. We know that He won eternal life for us at His side in paradise. We know that because of Him, death is not an end for us, but an entrance into glory—His glory. Because of Christ, we’ve been given a gift of new life in Him.

You would think after receiving this gift, we would be looking forward to that time we get to dwell with our glorified savior in peace and harmony and love. You would think, being made clean and righteous, we would keep our eyes on the kingdom of God that has been won for us, striving toward it and living it out in our daily lives.

What is really ridiculous is that we don’t. We know through faith what has been given us. We know what our ultimate and perfect destination is. But we look around at the things of this dying and decaying world and so often forget our destination and say, “Let’s stay here!” Our thoughts and desires focus on material things or petty prideful victories that don’t last. The forgiveness Christ won for us and the glory God has planned for us is so often forgotten, and our focus turns inward to ourselves. We think of me in the here and now and focus on staying here, protecting what I’ve got, maybe getting more. Our chief destination often becomes happiness and success in the here and now. Paradise, the kingdom of heaven and our place in it right now, is relegated to a “someday” destination. We’re more concerned with the staying here than we are

about being there. Through the Holy Spirit we've been put in the know about where Christ takes us and we should follow. But all too often we'd rather follow the faulty directions of the world's wisdom and reason.

"Listen to Him!" That's still God's call to us. Christ speaks to us, and He allows us to understand more clearly than Peter, James and John possibly could have on that mountain so long ago. *"We have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."* We have received the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures and know the truth of Christ, that we have been purchased by His blood from sin and death and that we now stand in the kingdom of heaven.

We must receive these things as the gifts they are. We must love them, appreciate them and yes, obey them. God, our savior Jesus Christ, has given us His Word that we may hear, read and ponder it to the strengthening of our faith. Moreover, He has given it that we may be driven and inspired to live it out in our lives.

Peter, James and John were allowed to bask in the glory of God for a short time. When it was over, after God had said, "Listen to Him!" Jesus pointed them forward to the cross and the empty tomb. We have experience the glory of God in receiving His Holy Spirit which gives us faith in Christ. God tells us "Listen to Him!" and points again to the cross and the empty tomb and what lies beyond.

Enjoy God's blessings in this life, but don't say "Let's stay here!" Don't give this world's wisdom and its directions toward worldly things false authority and truth. This world is fallen, and you are no longer part of it. You are forgiven and righteous and pure and yes, perfect. Christ has won you a better destination. Christ has given you a better direction. Listen to Him. Joyfully hear His Word preached. Happily read His Word in your homes. Faithfully pray to your savior and listen for His answers. Enjoy your earthly blessings, but always seek to do so in obedience and glory to the one who has prepared an everlasting place for you in His glory. Seek His direction in Worship, Word and prayer, for it surely leads us to the place where you and I will one day be very right when we say to Christ's face, "Lord, it is good that we are here."