

Gospel — Mark 9:2-10

Jesus took Peter, James, and John
and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them,
and his clothes became dazzling white,
such as no fuller on earth could bleach them.
Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses,
and they were conversing with Jesus.
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,
"Rabbi, it is good that we are here!
Let us make three tents:
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified.
Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them;
from the cloud came a voice,
"This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."
Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone
but Jesus alone with them.

As they were coming down from the mountain,
he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone,
except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead.
So they kept the matter to themselves,
questioning what rising from the dead meant.

Gospel Study — *A Vision to Guide Us*

This is such a wonderful Gospel that I am thrilled to share with you today. I believe this Gospel can give us a vision of what we are to be. If you know something about vision and mission statements, you know it's very important to first have a view of who we are, to know what we are to be about. Jesus knew that more than anyone. Have you ever felt that there is so much going on in your life, you just need time to get away in order to get it together? That's what Jesus is feeling and that's what the disciples are experiencing.

We need to put this into context here. Jesus is about to begin the journey to Jerusalem that will lead to his passion and his death. He had just told the disciples a few verses earlier that they too must take up their cross and follow him. You might recall that Peter protested and the other

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disciples resisted this call to carry their cross. And so Jesus decides to take a few of them onto a retreat where hopefully they will gain a clearer vision of what God wants for them. We are told at the beginning of this Gospel, Jesus takes along Peter, James and John who form the inner circle of the disciples. They were his closest companions and friends. In fact, Peter, James and John happen to be the first disciples Jesus had called to come follow him and now they're following him along a mountain of glory, but they will also be called later to share in his agony in Gethsemane. They formed a small support group; even though they didn't always offer the support Jesus had wanted.

That suggests to us where we might experience the Lord in our life. Isn't it among the inner circle of our family and our friends? Don't we experience the Lord and get a good sight of what our life is about when we pray with close companions; when we have a small support group. Isn't that what lifts us up and helps us out? That's what Jesus knew instinctively. So he goes off to this mountain retreat.

We're told he is led up the mountain...if you study the Scriptures it becomes obvious that mountains are very sacred sites. It's a sacred setting for any apparition or vision or divine revelation. Just as Moses was called to Mount Sinai and experienced God there and received the Law, so Jesus is presented almost like another Moses. Again, why did he go there? He went for the same reason we sometimes go on retreat to get our life together, to see what really matters most and to listen to what God's will for our lives might be.

There we are told Jesus was transformed, transfigured. The word in Greek suggests a change in his very form in being which suggests what will happen later after Jesus' resurrection; a transformation of his life. That same transformation is, to the disciples, a preview of the time when Christ will come again. It is also to preview the coming attraction to their own resurrection. We are told that Jesus' clothes turned a dazzling white; whiter than any bleacher could make them, which suggests that this is supernatural transformation. The hint here is that if we want to be transformed, if we really want to have a change of life, that we have to go to that place where we experience God. Where is your mountain? Where is the place where you get renewed and transformed? Where do you get lifted up? Most of life we live in the valley where there are a lot of ebbs and flows and highs and lows, but there are certain places, certain people and certain experiences we can have, where we are inspired and lifted up. That's what Jesus wanted for his disciples, that they could have a glimpse of the glory that ultimately is offered to everyone, especially at our day of resurrection.

We're told in this vision—and we should not understand this so literally maybe as figuratively—the two figures of Moses and Elijah stand on either side of Jesus. Standing there, he is talking to them. Moses represents the Law and Elijah the Prophets, and these are the two main divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures which says immediately to the disciples in this image that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. In fact, he will replace them. In this glorious vision and experience we're told that Peter was overwhelmed and said, "Rabbi how good it is for us to be here!"

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Now think for a time, where have you thought that and said that? "It's so good to be here. It's just so good that we came here, that we experienced this." When we're with our family or friends or have a holy experience, it's almost like you feel the presence of God there and you want to stay there forever. That's why Peter says, "Let's erect three booths on the site." Someone once said it's the first church festival ever set up. "Let's set up three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Obviously Peter wanted to maintain this mountain high experience. He did not want to come down to earth. He did not want to face the hardships that were on the road ahead of him. He wanted to stay with the glory and avoid the agony that was shortly to come because that's part of the transformation experience and process. Just as we want to get in on the good and avoid the bad. It's a natural inclination in all of us.

Out of this experience we're told again another wonderful symbol is a cloud. The cloud is the symbol of God's presence. Remember, it was the pillar of cloud by day that guided Israel all through the desert? In fact nebulae, the Latin word we use to talk about nebulous experience, means something vague; and isn't that true of God's presence? We can't always grasp it. We certainly can't control it. These mystical experiences cannot be fabricated or manipulated. We cannot bring them about ourselves. We can't control God, but we are attentive and receptive to His presence. Like a cloud it hovers over us; like His spirit that comes to us. Out of that cloud comes a voice—this is a beautiful thing. The voice speaks this wonderful message: *This is my son, my beloved, listen to him.*

This is the same message you might recall that Jesus heard at the baptism in the Jordan. It is the same reaffirmation of who he was as a beloved son of God. This is what we all need to hear, not just once but over and over again, especially when we're going through difficult times. Don't forget, God led Jesus up the mountain top because he was about to go down to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He needed this experience. He needed strength from these words; the assurance that God's love was with him. Just as we, when we're going through the most difficult times, need to take time to pray. When we're going through the most difficult times—and we feel all alone—we need to be with our friends and strengthened by our small community of support.

Jesus is no doubt moved by this reassurance. He is strengthened by this vision himself as are the disciples because this is intended for them as well. We are told that the voice instructs them, "Listen to Jesus." Listen to Jesus. This is what we need to keep telling ourselves when we're going through hard times. All we need to do is look and listen to Jesus. As they do, all of a sudden everything else disappears and we're told all they see is Jesus. What does that mean, "All they see is Jesus?"

Jesus is all they needed for the road ahead. This point came so powerfully home to me this past week. I keep learning so much in my work at St. Joseph's here in the West End. I had an experience last Sunday showing that the Lord really does lift up this community on Sunday and calls them to a kind of a mountain where they can experience Him at the liturgy. All God's people are invited there.

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I was all set to begin Mass and was waiting for everybody else to be ready and I sat down and as I always say, we're on God's time at St. Joe's. So I'm waiting and just praying and a woman comes along and I introduce myself to her and we had few minutes I guess—I didn't know when Mass was going to start—so I said, "Tell me a little more about yourself. I'd love to get to know more people here." She sat down and said, "You want to know something about me? Well this past year my son received a double life sentence in prison for murdering someone." My heart sank. And she continued, "A few months later, my daughter committed suicide." Oh my goodness, my heart sank again. She went on, "And with all this, their father and I separated and divorced and last week the boyfriend I was with—I thought we would be engaged—left me."

I'm thinking, "I don't know how this woman keeps going." I said to her, "How in the world do you hold it together?" Without hesitating she looked at me and said, "Honey, I hold onto Jesus and Jesus holds onto me." *I hold onto Jesus and Jesus holds on to me.* I was ready to begin that liturgy because she had fired me up to understanding what liturgy really is. It is a time when we all go up the mountain because life is hard in the valley. Life is difficult and sometimes you get way down from the problems and pressures we experience in the valley. God wants to lift us up in order to keep us going.

We started that liturgy and I looked over and saw her and we were singing, "Jesus in the morning, Jesus in the noontime, and Jesus when the sun goes down." I imagine this is what keeps her going. She talked about praying to Jesus in the morning, praying to Jesus in the noon time, praying to Jesus when the sun goes down. I was lifted up by that kind of faith that the Lord wants to instill in us, that leads us to the mountaintop. We can go there, for God is inviting us.

I was talking to our business manager just yesterday and we were going through the books and I was praying, "I don't get it, how are we going to keep going? What is this? What's going to happen?" He said, "Father don't forget, our people here in this parish ask that same question all the time." I said, "That's true, but still how are we going to balance these books? How are we going to make ends meet. How are we going to make it all work together?" He said, "You know I'm going to tell you something Father, you may have noticed this already, whenever I come here to St. Joe's to pray with these people, I know that these people know that they need God and you know when I go back to my parish, I don't hardly ever get that strong feeling. But when I come here, when they pray, the way they sing, the way they respond, you know that they know they need God."

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Now we don't have to be economically poor to be poor. Every one of us experiences poverty in lots of ways: poor health, poor marriage, poor situation with the children, poor circumstances of our life, poor whatever it might be, the emotional state that we are in. We can all experience that. When we hit the pit of depression we need to head on up to the mountaintop. The Lord wants to lead us there, but where is your mountain? Where is the place you experience the presence of God? Where is the place where you feel lifted up? Where do you go to pray? Where do you go for that vision, that greater perspective of life? We've got to go there. We've got to see Jesus helping us up there.

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I remember going to mountain Tabor in Israel. It was a wonderful experience to walk up there. At the very top—when we finally reached the top—there's a huge sign that says, "No tents and no camping allowed." That was a reminder, you can't stay there. In that experience I remember being there and praying there and feeling that there's something that lifts you up when you're on top of it all. When you are on a mountaintop your problems look smaller and God looks greater.

When you've got a view from the Hubble telescope, you can't help but see how small the world is and how humble we all are in the hands of our Almighty Father and creator. You've got this feeling, this faith that comes with a greater perspective when you're given the mountaintop view. God wants to give us that view from above. God wants to give us that view in the pew where we stand and where we pray and he wants to give us that grace that we need to get through our week. This is what the vision is all about that we all need. You can't get through life without a vision. We need vision to see where we're going and that vision comes from the Lord.

The disciples are given this vision. They are given a vision of Jesus' passion just before going up the mountain, now they are given a vision of his resurrection. They need both visions to go ahead with this plan that God has for them. Interestingly, in the last line of this Gospel we hear the disciples continue to discuss what rising from the dead meant. Jesus told them not to tell anyone. Why did he say, "Don't tell anyone?" Maybe it's because, as Bishop Sheen said, "They only had half the story at this point." They did not understand the glory yet without the agony. They did not understand, you cannot have the crown without the cross. They had to wait a while to put it all together before they understood it. Or, as I often think, (sometimes we say this in the church) if you really want to get the word out to some people, but you don't have the time to call everybody, then just gather together a few people, tell them what you want to tell them, and then tell them, "Whatever you do, don't tell anybody."

Maybe that's what Jesus had in mind because somehow we hear the whole story today. This story precedes the passion and leads to the resurrection. It is so necessary when we are going through hard times to have a vision to hold onto. Again think of what my friend said. I'll never forget it. How do you hold together? "Father, I hold onto Jesus and Jesus holds on to me." She goes up that mountaintop each Sunday. She's one of the leaders in the parish who lifts us all up. We are called to that experience. The disciples of course did not understand it. They didn't want to understand. Maybe they couldn't understand why the cross was facing them in their life. Why this suffering? Why the hardship? Why was life so difficult? They did not understand but they would someday. It all fits together and this is the mystery. This is the vision. Somehow it's those hard days, it's those difficult nights, it's those horrible, heavy crosses that are the force of the transfiguration process. That is what changes us; that is what transfigures us; that is what inspires us and we become a mountaintop people.

I'm going to end my part of this explanation with, I think, the greatest recent example of someone going up to the mountaintop. On the night before he was assassinated on April 3, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered what I believe was an entirely moving, visionary sermon. He ended this sermon hours before he would be assassinated with these words: "We've got some difficult days ahead but it doesn't matter to me now because I have been to the

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mountaintop. And I don't mind, like anybody, I would like to live a long life—longevity has its place—but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will and He has allowed me to go up to the mountain and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Let us just take a quiet moment right now. The disciples were invited to listen to Jesus. Let's listen to the Lord and ask Him, "What is it the Lord wants to reveal to us, about our life, about what would be our mission in life? What is the vision He wants to give us?" Don't think in glorious or grandiose ways. Think in simple, humble ways about how the Lord is calling us to work, to help one another in the journey with Jesus through life. How can He use our time and our talent? We have to start right at home, right around us in our own parish community, in our own circle at work, among the people we rub shoulders with.

I personally believe—at least it is certainly my hope and prayer—that this time with the Lord can be a mountaintop experience. Be it ever so small a mountain but nevertheless it is our way of coming away with Jesus to listen to the Lord so that little by little, we could be transfigured and transformed. So that we could go back to work and go back home a different person. So we can take what we see and what we feel that we learn here and take that back richer and better to give to others. I believe that, don't you? This is where we are invited to come this Lent, that we could be fed by this daily bread of God's word. Amen.