

Mark 9:2-9

In three days a number of Christians will begin the tradition of giving up something for Lent. With today's troubled economy, many of these people probably feel as though they have already been living through Lent for the past number of months. They, like many others, have cut back on their spending. They have cut out expenditures from their monthly budget. This year's Mardi Gras may be one of the leanest Fat Tuesdays in many years.

Today is the church's "Mardi Gras" so to speak. It is the last hurrah for Christians until Easter. After today we bury the hallelujahs for six weeks. We set aside the Gloria in Excelsis. We remove the white from the altar and don it with black and purple. We enter the valley of the shadow of death with Christ, but on Easter Sunday we leave that valley with resurrection joy.

Before we enter the valley of Lent, however, we find ourselves today sitting atop a mountain with Jesus and three of His disciples. It is His transfiguration. To transfigure means to change one's outward appearance. We see change all the time, but not like the disciples saw it that day. All of us have changed in appearance since the day of our birth. We have more or perhaps less hair. We have increased in stature and in girth. Over the course of time everyone changes dramatically in appearance; but Jesus changed in an instant. On top of the mountain with His disciples, His physical appearance changed so much that His disciples became terrified. St. Mark tells us that His clothes became radiant, intensely white beyond that which any bleach on earth could make them.

When a horror film like "Friday the 13th" opens in theaters, moviegoers enjoy the thrill of getting the wits scared out of them. But Peter, James, and John never saw it coming. Without warning Jesus changed so that He shined like the sun. Moses and Elijah who had both been gone for centuries stood there talking with Jesus. And a dark cloud overshadowed them with the voice of the Father booming forth from it like thunder. And this was no horror film. It was real. Peter lost control of his senses. He began speaking words which made no sense. He said, "It's good, Lord, that we are here." He wanted to stay. "Let's build some tents," he said. "Let's camp out here for a while."

This is the same Peter who later on fell asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was thrilled to see Jesus' glory on the mountain, but he became quite bored with Jesus' suffering in the garden. He wanted to stay with Jesus on top of the mountain, but he wanted nothing to do with Jesus when He was arrested and put on trial in the court of Caiaphas. A lot of good that mountaintop experience did for Peter. We might think that seeing Jesus' magnificent transfiguration, Peter would walk away from that and be a shining example of a Christian. But when he came down from the mountain and entered the valley of the shadow of death, he lost his faith. He did not cling to his Savior but he denied ever knowing Him.

Today we are having a "mountaintop experience." Like Peter, James, and John we ascended the steps here in Augusta to be with Jesus. Moses and Elijah are here with us speaking to us from the sacred Scriptures. The voice of the Father is here commanding us to listen to His beloved Son. We do not see Jesus' glory here with our eyes as Peter, James, and John did, but we do see it by faith. By faith we see Christ within the elements of water, bread and wine. "Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit" we sing, for

God is here just as He was on the mountain, to reveal to us His merciful nature. His glory is seen in the comfort of His words in which He forgives our sins and gives to us the hope of His glory in heaven.

And so what happens to us when we descend down the mountain and enter into the valley of our week? Do we take our faith with us? Do we continue with Christ or do we live in the shadows of sin? Let's make no mistake about it...we are every bit the sinner Peter was. We deny Christ by how we live just as he did. We shoot off our mouth first and have regrets later. We become bored in the presence of our Savior. We like Peter have trouble staying awake and paying attention even, as Jesus asked, for one little hour. You and I are not here on Jesus' mountain as perfect specimens of Christianity. We are sinful through and through. And we dragged with us this morning all of our sins and guilt right up those steps.

But friend, that's why Jesus is here. To transfigure means to change, and that transfiguring goes on here each and every week. Jesus does not change...you and I do. He changes us by the power of His living words. And this transfiguration is not just skin deep. Jesus changes our hearts and lives. Understand first of all that Jesus has changed who you even are. You are no longer sinners without hope and without God in the world. You are fellow-citizens with the saints and are of God's household. You may have lugged your sins and guilt in here today, but they are now gone. Jesus has changed your burden for you. He carried your sins to His cross and died for you. He was laden with your guilt. He felt your hopelessness being divorced by His Father. The burden He now gives you to carry are the gifts of His grace—peace and joy, forgiveness and salvation, a conscience free from guilt, the sure hope of heaven.

This change Jesus made for you here by the power of His Word and Sacraments. And every time you come up here to His holy mountain where His gifts are given, Jesus is at work in you to change your heart and life. Do you have anger toward your fellowman? Jesus changes you here by giving you His heart which is full of love. Do you carry around a grudge in your heart? Jesus changes you by forgiving you and enabling you to forgive others. Do you deal with despair? Jesus changes you by giving you real life in His words of life. In Him your life has meaning and purpose.

On the mountain Peter, James, and John saw Jesus change in an instant. For us in our daily lives the change may take time. But it comes within us as Jesus works in us through His Word and Sacraments. I recall the sainted Dr. Robert Preus telling us in class at the seminary one day of when he was a pastor in a church up in northern Minnesota. "And that church," he said, "was full of drunks...men who were terrible to live with. But," he continued, "after a number of years they all changed—every one of them. I watched it happen right before my eyes." We all asked Dr. Preus, "How? How did you get that change to take place in your congregation?" He smiled and said, "I just kept preaching the Gospel."

That same Gospel is for you here week after week. I don't care if you are a drunk, or an adulterer, or if you have hatred in your heart and carry a grudge around within you...not one of you is more of a sinner than I am. And Jesus died for all of us. Do not take your guilt back down those steps today. You are forgiven. God holds nothing in His heart

against you. He is at peace with you no matter how you have lived because you have a Savior and His name is Jesus.

And He who was transfigured before His disciples on the mountain will change you because He cares about you. He cares about your heart and life. He will not let you leave this mountain and go down into the valley without Him. He lives in you. He is for you. As you now enter into the valley of death...the season of Lent...His word to you is that Lent is not about what you give up for Him, but that He freely, out of love, gave up everything for you. In these troubled times He promises to sustain you. He will take care of all your needs as He sees best. He will never forsake you.

Peter, James, and John on that mountain saw Jesus' glory, but friend, do not be envious of them. You are right now in the presence of that same glorified Jesus. He is here with all His saints in heaven. He is here to make you a part of that great company. He is here on this mountain with His gifts for you. He is here and you are forgiven. Amen.