

“Good To Be Here; Good To Leave Here?”

Mark 9:2-9

February 11, 2018

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

Whenever I go on vacation or on a business trip, upon my return, many of you will say something like this to me: “Welcome back!” Or, “Good to have you back.” By now, many of you realize that I have pretty much of a stock answer for these comments. Most often, I will say, “It was good to be gone, but it is good to be back.” In other words, both places are good. It’s not like this place is so perfect that I can’t stand to go anywhere else for a vacation. Nor, does it mean that the vacation spot is so wonderful that I simply can’t bear the thought of returning to Great Falls. I enjoyed being at the place of my vacation or meeting. But I also enjoy coming back home.

Our children recently sang a traditional Transfiguration hymn which involves the phrase, “’tis good Lord to be here.” This begs the question. Where is “here”? Why is it good to be there? And what is to be the impact of leaving? Will that be good as well?

In our text for today, Jesus chose three disciples: Peter, James, and John, to accompany him to the top of the mountain. I’ve often wondered: was it hard for Jesus to convince the disciples to come or did they view this as a special field trip or vacation? The context of the lesson indicates that this was a troublesome time. Jesus had quiz them regarding who people thought he was. Peter spoke up first and said, “You are the Christ.”

Jesus then began to talk about what it mean to be the Christ. Instead of wielding political, military, or social power, Jesus talked about being rejected, suffering many things, and being killed “even though he would rise from the dead on the third day”. Again, Peter speaks up quickly and tries to correct Jesus. This didn’t go well and resulted in Jesus referring to Peter as Satan. Then, Jesus spoke about what it meant to be a disciple. Instead of earthly gain, the love of the masses, and an easy life, Jesus told them that followers of His would have to deny their personal desires, accept suffering, and do what Jesus did.

After this difficult and, perhaps, depressing incident, Jesus says to Peter, James, and John, “Let’s go on a hike. Let’s climb that mountain over there.” Can you imagine the reaction? Perhaps they didn’t want to go. Perhaps they were rethinking this whole “Jesus as the Christ” thing. Here they were, following Jesus all over creation and He wasn’t going to be the kind of Christ which they expected them to be. Nor, was following Jesus the kind of life they thought it would be. Why would they now want to go to the top of some mountain? Did Jesus have more requirements and burdens for them to bear? Maybe they wanted a break from the ministry. Maybe now would be a good time to rest up and take some time off. Besides, how easy would it be for them to hike to the top of the mountain?

Well, as you know, the three disciples agreed to go with Jesus and, boy, was it worth it! It would be an experience they would never forFirst of all, they would see Jesus being transfigured before them. His appearance, both clothing and body, were changed and shown with the glory of God Himself. They were able to see that Jesus was truly the divine Son of God. Up until that time, they knew Jesus only as a human Rabbi who, perhaps, had some direct help from God in doing miraculous things. Now, they could see that He was God Himself. He would be able to save them from everything. Not only could He save them from the consequences of sin, as he had been doing with His miraculous signs – hunger, illness, danger, and demon possession, but He could save them from the punishment for sin – death, the grave, and eternal punishment in hell with Satan. This was an awesome experience!

Secondly, the three disciples were able to witness the appearance of Moses and Elijah. These two men of God from the Old Testament, representing the Law and the prophets, confirmed that Jesus had indeed fulfilled the Law of God by His perfect obedience and for the sake of all people. H would also fulfill the prophets’ words by His innocent suffering and death for the sins of all the people.

Not only was Jesus the right man for the mission of salvation, but the mission of salvation was the correct way to do it.

Thirdly, if that wasn't enough, the three disciples experienced the glory of God Himself. A cloud covered the mountain, much like the cloud of the Old Testament covered the tabernacle, indicating that God Himself was truly present. And if there were any loose ends to be tied up regarding Jesus – His identity and His mission – God the Father settled them all. He said, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him."

If there had been any reluctance on the part of the disciples to come to the mountain, it was gone now. As usual, Peter is the first to speak and in the midst of all of these things that happen, he said, "Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." Instead of not wanting to come as they had felt before, now they didn't want to leave. They were experiencing Jesus in all of His glory. They were experiencing the Law and the Prophets directly through the presence of the chief lawgiver, Moses, and the most powerful prophet, Elijah. They were hearing God declare to them that Jesus was His Son and should be listened to in order to be saved.

After the voice spoke from the mountain, the disciples looked up and saw no one but Jesus. And Jesus said, "It's time to go, fellows." So, reluctantly and with regret, these men went down the mountain. No doubt, they were experiencing disappointment at leaving this wonderful experience. And they had been told by Jesus not to tell anyone about their experience until "the Son of Man had risen from the dead." They likely wanted to tell everything, but they lacked understanding about how all this would play out.

Is this not similar to our experience as Christians? Jesus invites us to come up to an ordinary place: the church. Like the three disciples, we may be less than enthused about doing this. Jesus may not be the kind of Savior that we are looking for. We expect a Savior who is powerful and glorious. We want a Savior who will do what we want and give us what we desire. We look around us and we look at our situation, but we don't see the might and the glory.

Like the three disciples, we may not be too excited about Jesus' definition of a disciple. Who wants to deny themselves anything in a world and a culture which tells us to indulge our every wish? Who wants to intentionally accept suffering for the cause of Christ in a world where suffering is to be avoided at every cost question? Besides, what we expect when we come to church may be exactly what the three disciples expected when they climbed the mountain.: A time of rest forfeited and more talk about discipleship. So, people skip church, sometimes habitually, and think that it's no big deal. They don't want to be here. They have better, more exciting things to do with their time. Maybe you have felt that way. Maybe you have acted that way at times. Are they right? They are as right as the three disciples were when they thought the same thing before ascending the Mount of Transfiguration.

When we come to church, Jesus is revealed to us in a truly miraculous way, not in all of his glory as the disciples experienced it on that first Transfiguration, but hidden in bread and wine. He is here among us, not only spiritually, but in a real way upon our altar.

We see and hear Moses and Elijah, not in the glorious way that the disciples did, but we experience their presence among us through their words. We hear the law every Sunday, condemning us for our sin and sentencing us to eternal death and hell. We hear the promises, first made known by the prophets, of God's salvation for us through the forgiveness of sin which His Son earned for us through his death on the cross and the everlasting life which Jesus won for us by His resurrection from the dead. We are immersed, not in a cloud, but in the waters of our baptism in which God the Father, who declared of Jesus, "This is my Son," now declares to us because of Jesus, "You are my sons. You are my daughters."

Church is not a religious meeting, obligation, or religious duty. Church is where we come to commune with and interact with God in a very personal and intimate way. We hear of His love. We experience His mercy and forgiveness. We receive His comfort, assurance, and encouragement. We support, encourage, and help one another with the love and mercy that we have received from God.

Like the disciples, especially Peter, we do not want to leave and give up this unlikely “mountaintop experience” and face the world with its hatred, discouragement, and evil.

Why not just stay on the mountain? It might have seemed like a good idea for Jesus and the disciples and it might seem like a good idea for ourselves. But there are problems that arise if that were the case. For Jesus, if He doesn’t leave the mountain, then no salvation is accomplished by Him on the cross. If the disciples don’t leave the mountain, then no one is made aware of salvation, either.

For us, who know how this all played out, unlike the three disciples, we cannot stay here, either. If Christians stay hidden in their houses of worship, then no one will know of God’s love for them, either and no one else will be saved.

The three disciples expecting very little, but they experienced communion with God in a unique way and enjoyed the experience even though it was quite frightening. Then, Jesus left the mountain and accomplished salvation for all people by His obedient life, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his victorious resurrection from the grave to life again. After Jesus’ resurrection, the disciples became joyful and enthusiastic proclaimers of the Word of God and distributors of His Sacraments so that those who had not experienced the glory on the mountain as they had, nevertheless would reap the benefits of that mountaintop experience themselves.

In the same way, let us come to the mountain, that is, the Church of God. Let us see Divine Service for what it is. It is not merely moral duty or a religious meeting. Rather, it is meeting God face-to-face in the Word which we hear, in the bread and wine which we eat and drink, and in the blessing and benediction.

Then, let us leave the mountain and live out our vocations in our everyday lives. We bring the fruits of Christ’s ministry to the lives of people in our congregation and to the lives of people in the world. We are able to do this immediately and effectively because, unlike those disciples, we already know the rest of the story.

Let us not sell short goes on here in this building on Sundays and other special days. What happens here is what we need, what we desire, and what we crave: unconditional love for us by God, full and complete forgiveness from God; total acceptance by God, and hope and purpose for the future. Let us be here regularly and often. Yet, on the other hand, we are not to be religious hermits who only attend church and did not engage the real world. We come to the mountain to receive God’s gifts that we might leave the mountain and distribute these gifts to the world. Like my evaluation of a vacation or business trip, it’s good to be gone, but it’s good to be back. It is good to be on the mountain. It is good to be in the world. As our children saying, “Tis good, Lord, to be here! Yet we must not remain; But since thou bidst us leave the mound, come with us to the plane.” And He will. Amen