

"Better Than A Miracle"
2 Peter 1:16-21

February 23,2020

The Transfiguration of Our Lord

There is no doubt that we live in an experience driven culture. Often, something is not enjoyed, believed, or accepted unless it is accompanied by a dramatic experience. Simple words are not enough. For example, many movies today are filled with CGI – computer generated imagery. Moviemakers today can present any dramatic and exciting experience they wish through the power of special effects. Young moviegoers have come to expect a constant barrage of CGI and other special effects or they're not interested. Plots are often very thin, but they are still popular movies due to the special-effects. If you look back to old movies and television shows, there was always so much talking and intricate plot development. Many today would find that boring. Any attempted special effects in old movies or television shows is laughable according to today's viewers because of their primitive nature. Excitement and experience through bigger CGI and better special-effects are the way to go today.

The Gospel reading for today about The Transfiguration of Our Lord would be perfect for such an action movie. It's filled with excitement and experience which could easily be conveyed through sophisticated special-effects. Jesus takes his inner circle of disciples – Peter, James, and John – up to the top of a high mountain. There, Jesus is "transfigured" (changed) before these three men. The text says that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. If that wasn't enough, then we have Moses and Elijah, prophets from of old who returned from the dead to talk with Jesus. And if THAT wasn't enough, a bright cloud, reminiscent of the presence of God with His people in the wilderness, overshadows Jesus and his disciples. And if THAT was not enough, they hear the voice of God the Father Himself from the cloud saying, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

The disciples were terrified at all of these experiences. However, I think that if Peter, James, and John were modern-day millennials, they would have looked at Jesus transfigured, watched Moses and Elijah talking, stared at the bright cloud, and listened to the voice of God Himself and would have said, "Cool!"

Since so many people enjoy exciting experiences and have become so accustomed to having such experiences in the entertainment field, they think that this is what the practice of the Christian faith should entail: exciting experiences. Whether these experiences are true or not does not seem to matter to some people. The emphasis is on the experience itself.

Now, there is no doubt that experiences can be very powerful. However, they are not always dependable. Not every worship service can be a so-called "mountaintop" experience like the disciples had. Experiences come and go and can generally not be relied upon. Some people can spend all their time searching for a church that deals in exciting experiences. They may find such a church or not. They may end up flitting from church to church. A faith based on experience is not always reliable.

Experiences in and of themselves can be deceptive. One of the reasons sin began in the first place is that Eve having been tempted by Satan, based her course of action, not on the solid Word of God, but the fact that the forbidden fruit was on a tree which “was a delight to the eyes.” (Genesis 3:6) Even today, Paul says, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” to accomplish his evil desires. (2 Corinthians 11:14) So, depending upon experiences to guide our faith can actually deceive us.

A purely experience-based faith can certainly be enjoyable, especially during good times in our lives and special occasions in the church calendar, like Easter and Christmas. People may view such enjoyable experiences like they do CGI. They are entertaining, but they do not think that they are really real. As you well know, some people only attend Divine Service on Easter and Christmas. Are they doing it in order to hear the Word of God or simply because it makes them feel good?

Some people might get the idea that I am opposed to experiences. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Experiences, used in the right context for the right reason, are great Today’s Gospel reading is a prime example of that. Peter, James, and John had a truly powerful and moving experience. There’s no denying that. The experience was very real and not some CGI. What makes the experience of these disciples valuable for our lives of faith is that these experiences do not just feel good, but convey very good news to us.

Jesus’ identity is shown to be something more than a mere rabbi is shown by His experience in being transfigured. He was filled with and radiated back heavenly glory, much like Israel had seen in the tabernacle church in the Old Testament. This experience by the disciples showed them that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the son of God and Savior for the world.

Jesus’ mission is something more than simply being an itinerant preacher and a miracle worker. Jesus had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets who said that the Messiah must suffer and die for the sin of the world. This is shown by the appearance of two special visitors, Elijah and Moses, who came, not simply to be a special effect in this interesting story, but to discuss with Jesus and show their approval for the culmination of his mission which was about to take place on a cross and empty tomb in Jerusalem.

The appearance of a bright cloud which overshadowed this group was not simply a CGI-like special effect to make the story more exciting. Rather, it was to bring to mind a similar shiny cloud which indicated the presence of God Himself in the tabernacle in the desert. It was to indicate that God Himself was truly present among them. The voice which thundered from within the cloud and said, “This is my beloved Son , with whom I am well pleased; listen to him;” God was present. God had spoken. God had approved the work of His Son.

Now, you may be thinking, “This is all well and good, but we don’t have access to these experiences ourselves. So how do these experiences help us?” Our text for today helps us to understand. Our text is from St. Peter’s second epistle in which he is sharing his personal remembrances of the experiences he had on the mountain of Transfiguration. He makes the claim that they are not “cleverly devised myths”. He

states strongly that he was an eyewitness of our Lord's Majesty. He goes through all those experiences which he had on the mountain.

St. Peter is not doing this to brag about the special things which he experienced as if he were superior to his readers or us. Nor is St. Peter trying to encourage his readers to seek after experiences like his as if they were somehow necessary for their faith. He is actually saying that his readers, both in Bible times and today, have something different and better than these magnificent experiences.

Peter writes, "And 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." According to Peter, the Word of God, in all of its forms, is more sure and, therefore, important than any or every religious experience you've ever had.

Peter is specifically thinking here of the Old Testament in which prophecies of the coming Christ and all that he would do were made. The experience on the Mount of Transfiguration does not cause something to happen, apart from Scripture. Rather, the experiences on the Mount validates the Old Testament and all of its promises and prophecies. Not everyone can have astounding experiences. Not everyone can know the meaning of such experiences. But the Word of God's for all and its meaning is clear.

These experiences also foreshadow the coming New Testament. As of the time of this epistle, some of these Scriptures were beginning to be gathered together. The experiences and their meanings as fulfillment of prophecy would be made clear in the New Testament books. Not everyone could ascend the Mount of Transfiguration. That was an experience that only three disciples had. But anyone and everyone can read the account of the transfiguration and of all of Jesus' saving works in the New Testament books.

What makes "the prophetic word" more sure than any experience is its origin? Peter makes the point that Scripture does not come from anyone's own imagination. Rather, the Holy Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are more reliable, dependable, and powerful than any feeling or experience we may ever have.

If you are searching for experiences to create and bolster faith in Jesus Christ, there is nothing inherently wrong with that. However, the only experiences which are sure and helpful are those connected to the Word of God. Such experiences may not appear to be flashy or "showy". Such experiences may not require any CGI to replicate. In fact, such experiences may seem to be rather plain and unnoticeable. However, because they are attached to the Word of God, they can convey much more than any mountaintop experience can.

You and I have the Holy Bible which is the very Word of God. Simply by hearing the Word of God read or preached to you, God creates faith, gives forgiveness of sins, and promises eternal life. Simply by reading the Word of God under the direction of the Holy Spirit, God strengthens your faith, conveys His will for your life, and empowers you with His Holy Spirit to do His will.

In Holy Baptism, God attaches His Word to water and does wondrous things through it. He transfigures people. He changes people from spiritually dead sinners to

His living children and errors of eternal life. We are privileged to experience this transformation today as Kyrie and her two children become children of God with their sins washed away and a new and eternal life begun.

In the Lords Supper, God attaches His Word to bread and wine and does wondrous things, too. He feeds us with the very body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, as they are attached to bread and wine. We experience God's forgiveness and love in a very personal way. We receive His forgiveness, are encouraged in His love, and nourished to serve Him by loving and serving one another.

Even though our culture is immersed with the reliance upon the need for spectacular experiences and have merged that supposed need with our Christian faith, do not let this worry you nor discourage you when such experiences do not come your way. You and I have something far surer and more certain than the mountaintop experience of the apostles in our text. We have the Word of God, both the prophetic Word of the Old Testament and the fulfilling word of the New Testament. We, too, have experiences through that Word and everything attached to that Word which may not seem spectacular as the world measures special effects, but which convey to us everything which God has in store for us, up to and including eternal life in heaven. That's the best experience you could ever have. Amen.