

A Sermon for the Transfiguration, given on August 10, 2008

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On the mountain, in the presence of Peter, James and John, the appearance of Jesus changed. “The fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering” (the gospel, Luke 9:28f).

The Transfiguration was a revelation of the glory that belongs to Jesus by nature, from eternity, as God’s Son, but was veiled through the Incarnation. And it was a revelation of the glory that would be his again in the Resurrection, after he had accomplished the work of our redemption on the cross.

Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, appeared to Jesus to tell him that it was his vocation to die on the cross for the sins of the world, according the prophesy of the Old Testament. The moment of glory on the mountain strengthened him to fulfill the vocation that Moses and Elijah confirmed.

The Transfiguration calls to mind Exodus 34. When Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, “the skin of his face shone” from his encounter with God (Exodus 34:30). These two events reveal a pattern for worship. Through prayer, we ascend to the presence of God. As we get a glimpse of the glory of God, we are changed. As 2 Corinthians says,

We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed in the same image from glory to glory (3:18).

The glimpse of the glory of God that we get in this life looks forward to what the tradition calls “The Beatific Vision,” when we will see God face to face and be changed in a final way. First Corinthians says, “Now we see in a glass darkly, but then face to face” (13:12). Our current experience of communion with God, seeing through a glass darkly, sustains us through our share of the cross until we see God face to face.

The pattern of the Transfiguration reveals a contemplative approach to worship. A contemplative approach to worship seeks God for his own sake rather than for some particular purpose of ours. So often, we come to God wanting to know what he can do for us. We come to prayer like we come to the show, or to the market. God, here I am. What do you have for me?

Jesus did not ascend the mountain with a list of things he wanted the Father to do for him. He ascended the mountain to seek the Father’s face, to enter into the eternal communion he enjoys with the Father and, in that experience of communion, to know the Father’s will for his life.

So often our prayer lacks that contemplative aim. So often we come to God with plans for him to endorse, or needs for him to meet. So often we, like Peter, are too eager to fill the contemplative silence with words and busy-ness. The Father responds, “This is my beloved Son, hear him.” Which might be translated, “Shut up and listen.”

The goal of a contemplative approach to worship is not practical results in daily life or meeting our needs. The goal of contemplation is to take our minds off of ourselves altogether so that we can see

God. The goal of contemplation is to tune out the wants, needs and distractions of life and hear what God is saying.

Now, an objection is sometimes made to the goal of contemplation. If we all sit around looking at God all day, nothing will ever get done. However, the contemplative aim of prayer is not an excuse for laziness. Jesus ascended the mountain to see the Father's face. Then he descended to do the hard work of the Cross.

The goal of prayer is not that we would be freed from work, but that our work would be fruitful. As Mother Theresa once said, "If I didn't prayer three hours a day, I would never get anything done." Once we get a glimpse of the glory of God, and a sense of what God is calling us to do, we can pursue our labor with diligence. What we want to avoid is the busy-ness of the world, in which there is much frenetic activity but little done for the glory of God or the good of others.

Paradoxically, when we achieve a measure of contemplation, when we begin to see God and forget ourselves, we experience great practical benefits. In the experience of communion, there is forgiveness, peace and a new ability to see God's will for our lives. Life is different, not so much because we have talked God into rearranging the details. Life is different because God has changed us. We begin to see the world the way God sees it, and we begin to do the work that God wants done.

But the right order is important. We must seek God first, and then do what he calls us to do. As we seek God, as we ascend the mountain, we must lay aside, as much as we are able, concerns about practical things—What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear? (cf. Matthew 6:31). We must lay aside, as much as we are able, concerns about personal tastes and preferences. We must lay aside, as much as we are able, concerns about time.

Liturgical worship is contemplative by its very nature, for the focus is on God, not on us. The liturgy scripts the role of the perfect worshiper and invites us to invest our hearts in that role. In the liturgy, the Father invites us to ascend the mountain and see the glory of his Son.

As we pray in the collect, "Mercifully grant that we, being delivered from the disquietude of this world, may be permitted to behold the King in his beauty." And, as the Father said to Peter, "This is my beloved Son, hear him."