

Transfiguration
The Reverend David A. Brounstein
St. Matthew's Church
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In the Passion narrative, Pilate rhetorically asks Jesus the question, "What is truth?" He might just as well have asked, "What is reality?" Perceptions of reality are shaped by ones worldview.

For the pagan cultures of Biblical times, reality was the world of mythology. Perhaps it may be best described as an invisible, parallel, and pantheistic universe where multiple deities interacted aloof and apart from the human condition. These entities had mercurial dispositions and were about as dysfunctional a collection as might be found anywhere. Further, the realms they inhabited were truly places that you could not get to from here. This mythological world represented a counterfeit reality.

A common characteristic of most counterfeits is that they embrace elements of the real thing to increase their plausibility. Modern science fiction writers have invented a vocabulary of 'wormholes', 'stargates', and the like. These touchstones serve to transport their characters between parallel universes. C.S. Lewis employed a simple magical wardrobe in his 'Chronicles of Narnia' as the physical nexus; a means for children to navigate between worlds.

Unlike the common and pervasive pagan mythology of its day, the Holy Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation reflect that God is active and involved with His Creation for the express purpose of redeeming a people for Himself. Reality from a Biblical perspective is not our finding some secret path to reach the Kingdom of God. It is the realization that the initiative is always with and from God. Occasionally, we are permitted to get a glimpse of what the other side is like. The Kingdom of God is the ever present reality we often fail to perceive. That is what we begin to see in this morning's Gospel lesson.

The Transfiguration narrative marks the climax of a series of events that appear in the same order in each of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus first asks his disciples a series of questions. Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? Saint Peter gets this one right and confesses that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, whose very name translated means 'God is Salvation.'

It was only then that Jesus began to teach the disciples that He would be killed in Jerusalem and be raised from the dead on the third day. If this was not difficult enough to comprehend, they are told that (Lk. 9:23) "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."

It was only after these teachings that the disciples, Peter, James, and John, witnessed Jesus transformed with the brightness and light that clothed him before the foundation of the world.

The spiritual life is one that typically unfolds over a period of time. Ask yourself, “Where might I find myself in the continuum of this story?” Many of us start out hearing about Jesus from others and believe him to be just a good man or perhaps, one of the prophets. Many of us continue on in faith and become true disciples who do indeed confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Many disciples become content and rest at the bottom of the mountain; happy to follow Jesus on the plain, but unwilling to exert any effort beyond the basics. Then there were the three, Peter, James, and John, who ventured out in faith to pray with Jesus on the mountaintop.

As they awoke and saw the glory, the disciples also saw Moses and Elijah, arguably the archetype Old Testament representatives of the Law and the Prophets. Peter became excited and believed the Kingdom Age was being inaugurated. Common Jewish expectation was that God and the saints would tabernacle with man and Peter offered to begin to make the appropriate dwellings.

The Transfiguration was not about the long awaited inauguration of the Kingdom Age, instead, it was oriented towards another mountain located further south in Jerusalem. That mountain upon which the Son of God would shed His blood for the redemption of the world is the central focal point of all history.

Of the three disciples atop the Mount of Transfiguration, only one would make it to the summit of Golgotha on that Good Friday with Jesus. The spiritual life is not for the timid and is never devoid of pain. We would all like to live on the mountaintop forever. Instead, our lives are lived in an everyday reality that includes suffering, disappointment, and sorrow. The reason for the glimpse of glory on the mount was to sustain the disciples in the slough of despair.

The writer of Hebrews expresses it well, (Heb. 12:2) quote, “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him, endured the Cross.”

It is something to remember as we face our own Calvarys. The way to the glory of heaven is through the Cross - in our lives as well as His.