



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, MARCH 2, 2025  
EXODUS 34:29-35; PSALM 99; 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-4:2; LUKE 9:28-43a

## AGONY AND GLORY

***Luke 9:28-43a** [Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah"--not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.]*

Did you notice the parallel in our Gospel passage today? It seems to be the story of two beloved sons. One who is transfigured in glory on the top of

mountain; another who is convulsing and suffering in the dust of the valley below. Both fathers speak words of love. One out of exceeding joy; another out of

fear and desperation. I'm wondering if these stories, taken together, speak about the reality of human life and the presence of God in both moments.

Today is the apex of the liturgical season we call Epiphany – it's Transfiguration Sunday. After weeks of hints and intimations — a star, a dove, an abundance of wine — today we stand in full sunlight, basking in the Beloved's glory. Today we hear the very voice of God.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell the story of the Transfiguration, underscoring its importance to the early church, and all three end their accounts with the narrative of the "demon-possessed" boy whom the disciples can't heal. It's an odd pairing, to say the least, and it has always intrigued me. This singular event in Jesus's life has accumulated many layers of theological meaning. It reveals important things, for example, it reveals Christ's divine nature, confirms his Sonship, foreshadows his death, secures his place in the stream of Israel's history, exalts him above the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and prefigures his Resurrection. This is all

very good, but it leaves me kind of cold. I find it interesting, but it doesn't change my heart and makes me more loving. I am more interested in the boy who was suffering from seizures in the valley. Jesus came down from the mountain and reluctantly healed the boy. This is what I'd like to know: how does glory on the mountaintop speak to agony in the valley? What does it mean that the two experiences — fullness and emptiness, ecstasy and despair, light and shadow — share a landscape in this famous Gospel narrative? As I said earlier, there are two beloved sons in this story.

What happened in the valley when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain? What we know is that Jesus invited only three disciples up the mountain. The remaining nine spent the night in anxious futility, trying to do their Master's work as the stakes rose higher and higher. I imagine that the scene in the valley became tense and ugly as a much-longed-for healing didn't happen. We know that a father and a son suffered, even as the heavens broke open on the mountaintop. Some people who really needed Jesus that night experienced the

ache of his absence — even as a select few basked in his glory.

Now I tend to interpret the Bible as if its stories apply only to me — *me*, an individual. *My* mountaintop experience. *My* valley. *My* relationship with God. But this is so misguided and dangerous. Don't do what I do. The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that your pain does not cancel out my joy. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit — while one pew over I cry my eyes out because the ache of God's absence feels unbearable.

The same applies if I widen the lens. Do we not — in the privileged West — occupy so many mountains, while our siblings in other parts of the world dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence, and abuse? Do we not at the same time experience valleys peculiar to modern 21st century life — isolation, anxiety, depression, frenzy — while many who have less by way of material comfort enjoy the mountaintops of more

nourishing cultural traditions and communities?

To say this is all unfair is completely beside the point — it is the world we live in today. And so, here's the great challenge to the Christian life — the great challenge to the Church, Christ's body: can we speak glory to agony, and agony to glory? Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other — denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love for each other, so that no one among us — not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one — is ever truly alone?

Yes, Jesus came down from the mountain. Yes, he healed the desperately sick boy. But let's not forget the suffering that came first. Let's not flatten the story to give our religion neat lines and soft edges. The suffering was real, and it deserves honest witness. After all, the cry of that human father, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, he is my only child," is a desperate plea and an act of faith. He pushed his way through the crowd to speak to Jesus because he had hope and belief that Jesus could make a difference.

He didn't find his act of faith on a mountaintop; he forged it in the valley of his son's pain.

With Transfiguration Sunday, we come to the end of another liturgical season. Having seen the light of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long shadows of Lent. I don't know what voices will speak to us in the Lenten wilderness. Maybe you'll hear glory. Maybe I'll hear agony. Maybe we'll hear each other. Whatever

you hear, don't flinch. Don't flee. Don't assume that one voice must drown out the other. *Both* voices need to speak. Both voices have much to teach us. So, listen. *Listen*. Both voices are beloved of a Father.



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