

This morning we stand in that liminal space between the end of Christmas and Epiphany and the beginning of Lent. We turn away from the manger and the wise ones who traveled from a faraway country to pay homage to the Christ Child towards the looming cross where we will remember Christ crucified before the glory of the risen Christ on Easter morn. Often the church is much more comfortable with the season of Advent than the Season of Lent. We are much more comfortable with cooing over baby Jesus than with the Jesus, who as an adult chose the path of non-violence as he sought mercy and justice for all. This Jesus, who turned towards Jerusalem and the reality of the cross, is a Jesus that gives us a glimpse of what it means to be most fully human and it is a way that is less traveled by most of humanity.

Preceding our text today in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus foretells of his death and resurrection for the first of three times in Matthew. After rebuking Peter for responding to this foretelling, "God forbid this," Jesus told his disciples that in order to gain life one must be willing to lose it, for to follow him means to pick up your cross.

I'm sure you understand why most of us prefer Advent to Lent. Who wants to pick up a cross? Who wants to lose their life in order to gain it? Yet, this is where we enter the text today, for the narrator tells us that the disciples had six more days with Jesus. Six more days to ruminate on these life changing words, "Pick up your cross... Lose your life to gain it..."

"Six days later, Jesus took Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain." These three disciples are Jesus' inner circle, three of the first four disciples called by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel. He takes them up a high mount in the region of Galilee.

I have been up that high mount, where in the early 1920's a Franciscan order of the Roman Catholic Church built an impressive Church of the Transfiguration on the peak of Mount Tabor. I was thankful to be driven to the top of this 2,000-foot summit. There was a hiking trail, which many of us wanted to take, but we only had a short afternoon window of time and the switchbacks looked brutal. So instead we took the switchbacks designed for vehicles.

From the peak, we could see the surrounding farming lands, a 360 degrees' view. It was a beautifully clear blue skied day with mild temperatures. Yet, even the upward walk from where we had to park our cars to the church was enough to get our hearts pumping. And then we stepped into the church filled with beautiful tile mosaics recalling the magnificence of Christ's face that shone like the sun, as Moses and Elijah were talking with him.

Throughout my time in Israel, our pastoral renewal group was encouraged to place ourselves in the text and imagine what it would have been like. Whether or not this was the place of the Transfiguration, the Franciscans had crafted a sanctuary that caused us all to imagine. What we do know from the text, is that Jesus invited three of his disciples to ascend a mount. Little did they know what their hike would entail, for they would bear witness to the glorious mystery of Christ fully human, fully divine.

Have you ever had a mountain top experience? Maybe at a retreat or while standing outdoors surrounded by the beauty of the natural world. Maybe while holding the miracle of your newborn infant or a precious grandchild for the first time. Have you experienced something so grand that you couldn't wait to tell everyone?

Peter immediately wanted to memorialize the experience he witnessed. He wanted to build three monuments, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. I can only imagine that in his mind he was already to run back down the mountain to get the appropriate supplies. He wanted to make sure he could lead others to this very spot in the future. He wanted to capture this event for future believers! Oh, how often, we try to capture and memorialize spectacular divine experiences, always turning back to the event rather than turning to live the extraordinary wonder of God with us each and every moment of our lives.

As Peter's mind was swirling with building plans, something even more extraordinary happened. A bright cloud overshadowed Jesus, Moses, Elijah and the three disciples. From this descended cloud a voice interrupted Peter's plans, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him." This voice paralyzed Peter's thoughts of memorializing the experience, for his immediate reaction, as well as for James and John, was to fall to the ground, as they were overcome by fear.

What Peter, James and John experienced is called a Theophany. They experienced a palpable experience of the reality of God; an overshadowing cloud and an audible voice. Fear immediately overwhelmed the disciples. Yes, experiences such as these have a way of stopping us in our tracks. Yet, experiences such as these are almost impossible to fully comprehend in the moment and difficult to explain to others.

As I stood within the Church of the Transfiguration and imagined what the disciples experienced. I was overwhelmed with amazement, wonder and awe. To be standing in the proximity of this momentous event that happened some 2,000 years ago, drove me to my knees as well. What would I have done if I were one of the disciples? As a contemporary Christian song by MercyMe confesses, "Surrounded by your glory, what will my heart feel? Will I dance... or be still, will I stand... or fall to my knees, will I sing hallelujah... or not be able to speak at all?"

Peter, James and John fell to their knees and were unable to speak at all. They were overwhelmed by the experience. Can we imagine being present to the presence of God as these disciples were on Mount Tabor? [Pause]

What Jesus does next is where I would like to focus us today, for Jesus reached out and touched the disciples. I imagine Jesus stooping to place his reassuring hand on a shoulder or maybe even gently cupping his hand on a chin and lifting a disciple's face upward. Jesus reached out and he met his disciples in their fear. He met them where they were at and didn't rebuke them. He reassured them saying, "Get up off your knees, it's okay. You do not have to be afraid, for I am here."

"Jesus came and touched them." Touch is powerful. Presence is powerful. In the midst of the disciples' fear, Jesus didn't chastise and tell them they needed to believe certain dogmas or doctrines to be acceptable disciples. Jesus didn't turn away from the disciples and even say ye of little faith. Jesus turned towards them, reassuring them that they were not alone in their fear. Touch is powerful. Presence is powerful.

I don't know how many of you *The Shack*, which was published in 2008 read. But given that the movie is hitting the box office this Friday, I remember a powerful scene in the book where Mack, the main character, meets God. Mack is angry at God for his youngest child was abducted and most likely murdered, even though her young body was never found, only her red dress torn and blood stained. Mack in his grief felt compelled to return to the place of his deepest pain, to the shack where his daughter's

dress was found. Mack found everything as it was 4 years early and he raged at God, he wept uncontrollably, and then fell asleep totally exhausted.

When he awoke, he chastised himself for coming to the shack. What a fool he was to think that God would meet him in this place, but then as he started to leave he experienced a theophany. The rundown shack become a lovely log cabin and “a large, radiant African American woman came from inside and wrapped Mack in a huge bear-hug, all the while calling out his full name with the feeling of a long-lost love suddenly reunited.” In the midst of his deepest pain, his fear of never knowing what happened to his young daughter, Mack was touched by God, not on the shoulder or chin, but with a bear hug.

When have you experienced God’s touch in your life? How have you experienced God’s touch in your life? It may not have been a voice or a vision, but a deep understanding within you. On my way to the Lead Conference just a little over a week ago, as the cloud cover parted and the snowcapped mountains peaked out as I drove to Upland, I was overwhelmed by God’s presence. The majesty of the mountains spoke deeply to me of God’s goodness and deep gladness filled my heart. I remember clearly a litany of gratitude spilling forth from me as I drove.

In my master bedroom, I have a glider that I purchased many moons ago. It is my prayer chair, the chair where I journal, where I sit in silence, where I listen deeply for God’s movement in my life. With so many years of sitting and praying in this chair, God’s presence washes over and it is as if I am sitting in the very lap of God.

I don’t know how you most clearly experience the presence of God, but like Peter, James and John we are invited to be present to the divine, by the one who is already present with us. Remember, in our reformed understanding God initiates the relationship with us and we simply respond. God seeks us and not the other way around.

In Exodus, we heard God’s invitation to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there.” Moses waited six days, for it wasn’t until the seventh day that God broke the silence and spoke. Even though God’s first language with us is often silence, the glory of Lord settled on the mountain and was present to Moses as he ascended and waited.

Through Christ, God’s presence has settled on the highways and byways of our lives. God is with us, that is what we prepare to celebrate each Advent Season. I want to share an adaption of a prayer by St. Patrick that I learned at the Contemplative Retreat I will be attending starting the evening of March 5th:

Christ before us, Christ behind us. Christ above us. Christ beneath us. Christ beside us. Christ within us.

When I pray this prayer each morning, ending with my hands over my heart, I am far more attentive to God’s presence, to God’s touch in and my life.

Will you pray this prayer with me? Let us pray it together twice...

Yet, a story from Reader’s Digest still rings true for us today: A mother was putting her two-year-old to bed and as she left the room he pleaded with her not to go. His mother tried to reassure him by telling him that God would be there with him all night. But the boy replied, "But, I need God with skin on!"

Friends, we are to be “God with skin on” for each other and for all others. The touch of our lives on another may very well be life-saving, may heal brokenness, may reconcile hurts, may provide comfort, may provide reassurance that all shall be well.

I don't know what cross Christ is asking you to pick up or where Christ is asking you to lose your life to gain it. But, I do know that Christ touched those in deepest need and pain throughout his ministry among us. To be most fully human, most like Christ, we are invited to do the same. We are to be “God with skin on” where there is deep pain and overwhelming need in this world. A simple touch, empowered by God's love, from you or from me can transform a life. The question is will we dare to meet others in their deepest fear or pain or need? I pray so! Amen!