

February 19, 2023

A GOOD PLACE TO BE

Matthew 17: 1-9

Have you ever been somewhere, or had an experience, that was so amazing that when the time came for you to leave, you didn't want to? You wished that you could have just remained there and that the experience would never end?

Maybe it was a quiet vacation where the environment was relaxing and rejuvenating; where you were able to rest uninterrupted and enjoy life at your pace, and literally feel the stress melt away. Or it could have been an exciting adventure that brought more fun into your life than you have ever had before, or for a very long time.

Or maybe it was some brilliant performance, which when it ended, left you wanting more.

Or perhaps it was an all too short encounter with friends or loved ones that reminded you of just how much you are loved and appreciated.

I am sure that all of us have had those experiences when the time flew by far too quickly, and we had to reluctantly tear ourselves away and return to our life of hurry and worry.

Peter, James and John had such an experience when they went up on the mountain with Jesus and saw his glory revealed. It was an awesome experience; one that Peter wished would never end.

(Matthew) tells us that: "Jesus took Peter, James, and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them."

His appearance was completely changed. "His face was glowing brightly, and his clothes became dazzling white." (Matthew) goes on to say that: "There appeared Moses and Elijah, who were talking with Jesus."

What an amazing experience that must have been. It was an experience, the likes of which they had never had before. So, understandably, Peter wanted that moment to last.

In his amazement, he uttered words that I am sure are in our minds when we too experience those moments that move us beyond the ordinary, that lift us above the stresses of life and put us in a place where we can see and experience love and beauty and peace. Peter said: It is good for us to be here.

When Peter said, "It is good for us to be here", Peter obviously was not just speaking about the physical location; he was speaking about the experience that they were sharing: an experience of glory and wonder, of marvel and mystery. It must have been as reassuring as it was frightening. As humbling as it was awe-inspiring.

Understandably, Peter wanted to preserve the moment; he wanted things to remain that way - he wanted to prolong the experience. He said: "Let us build three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah". In other words, this is a good place to be; let us remain here. But as we all know only too well, life is not like that; we do not always find ourselves in such good places.

Life is filled with peaks and valleys, high and low moments. There are those moments when something marvellous happens in your life, something great, something to celebrate and remember. Maybe it's the day you fell in love, got married, the birth of a child, the purchase of a new home, a promotion at work, your graduation from school - those moments that you cherish, and wish would last, moments when you felt like you were on top of the world.

But life isn't always like that. Life is not one peak after another. There are the valleys too. Those difficult moments when things are just not going right - when you or a loved one have been diagnosed with a serious illness; when there is death in the family; when someone is laid off from work; when a relationship is broken.

Life as we know it is far from perfect; it has its ups and downs, and for some of us it would appear that there are more downs than ups; that there is more that causes stress than bring joy.

We wrestle with issues that wear us out. We pursue dreams that are often elusive. We deal with problems that keep recurring, and we wish that things could be different. We wish that we could be in a better place, not necessarily physically, but a better place emotionally, socially, financially, spiritually. A better place in terms of our health and our relationships. But what hope is there for that to happen?

The transfiguration of Jesus points us to such hope.

Interestingly, the word that is translated *transfigure* here in the Gospel is the exact word that is translated *transform* in Romans 12: 2, where Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

Transfiguration like transformation means to change. And that is what the disciples saw; there was a dramatic change in the appearance of Jesus; his face, we are told, shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

We need to put that in context, in order to appreciate the significance. The passage that we read from (Matthew) begins with the words: "*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.*"

Six days later. Clearly, something significant had taken place six days earlier, for the transfiguration is placed against the background of what took place six days earlier. What was it?

Six days earlier, Jesus had told his disciples that “he had to go to Jerusalem, where he would undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed.” (Matthew 16: 21)

It was devastating news, so much so that Matthew records that “*Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’*” (Matthew 16: 22).

So it was that six days after distressing his disciples with the news of his impending death, Jesus was transfigured before them, and that is significant.

Faced with the knowledge that he would soon be killed, Jesus did not retreat to some corner by himself wallowing in self-pity, dejected and depressed. Instead, he stood before his disciples high on the mountain, his face more radiant than they had ever seen it, his appearance brighter than they could ever have imagined. He was a picture not of dejection and defeat, but of glory and victory.

There was a change in Jesus all right, but it was not the change that one might have expected given what he said was to come. Instead of being surrounded by the gloom of death, he was radiating the light of life - the kind of radiance you would see in someone for whom things were going just great.

But here is what I think is very important for us to grasp: the radiance that was seen in Jesus, the glow on his face, was not because there was going to be a change from what was said six days earlier. Nothing would be different. He still was going to Jerusalem, he still would undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed. However, Jesus knew that when they would have done their worst, he would emerge victorious. He knew that he would not be defeated or destroyed, not even by death.

The story of the transfiguration is not simply a fascinating story; it is an experience that has great significance for all of us. It was not meant simply to be a display of Jesus’ glory, just for the sake of displaying his glory; it was a glimpse of what life with Christ can be like, a foretaste of the transformation that can take place in us when we walk with Jesus.

When the disciples saw Jesus transfigured, and Moses and Elijah with him alive and well, Peter declared “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter wanted to take up permanent residency on the Mountain, to preserve that moment, but they heard a voice saying to them “This is my Son, the Beloved; ... listen to him!”

Peter needed to know that as good as that experience was, it did not mean that they had arrived where they needed to be. Likewise, as terrifying and painful as that which awaits Jesus in Jerusalem may be, that too does not mean that the end has come. With God, there is always more, and there is always better beyond every moment – whether that moment is good or bad. And if he listens and follows, he will experience that which will ultimately lead to a better end.

That is what I want us to take away from this story of the transfiguration.

Our walk with God takes us beyond the moments of our lives - whether those moments are good or bad, whether they be prolonged or short-lived.

So let us not just settle for where we are in life – be it a good and joyful place, because we think we have arrived, or a bad and painful place because we believe, or are made to believe, that there can be no better for us; instead, let us listen to God as God speaks to us through scripture and through the stories of others; the stories of struggle and success, brokenness and healing, sadness and joy, despair and hope; we might be surprised at just what God is saying to us.

When we follow Jesus, whether that path takes us through joy or pain, the end to which God leads is always that of resurrection and wholeness. Let's trust God to take us beyond the various moments of our lives and unto that, which is not only better but more importantly, unto that which makes us better.

Thanks be to God.

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