**Last Sunday After Epiphany: Feast of the Transfiguration**

**Saint Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

**14 December 2021**

**Mark 9:2-9**

I have always been afraid of big storms and lightning. The rain, the darkness, the poor visibility on the roads, and all the thunder. To me thunder is associated with danger and with ominous events about to happen. In my case, the fear started when I was about 9 years old and a brother of one of my friends was injured by thunderous lightening when he was out playing soccer in the rain. He was never the same after that and I learned to associate thunder with danger. Thunder was the harbinger of death.

The voice coming out from heaven in today’s passage was a thunderous voice, wrapped in lightening that was dazzling white. And when I hear this voice, I always hear warnings of danger. Let us review the passage in more detail. Mark tells us that about 6 days after the episode when Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to a mountain to pray. We are told that once on the mountain, Jesus was transfigured, covered in dazzling white light, filled with glory. We are told that there appeared with him Elijah and Moses. They are speaking with Jesus and the disciples are overcome with emotion and fear. Peter offers to build three tents, one for Moses, one for

Elijah, and one for Jesus and the disciples. Then both Elijah and Moses disappear and there is just Jesus standing with the disciples.

I often wonder why this episode took place at all. Why the need for a Transfiguration event? There are many reasons given by commentators and I believe most of them are true. Some say that this episode is a fulfillment of what Jesus said just a verse before the beginning of our reading. In Mark 9:1 Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.” Now, the chosen three have seen the great power of the Kingdom of God in fulfillment of that promise. Other commentators say this event shows that Jesus is superior to the Law (represented by Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah) since at the end of the passage both the Law and the Prophets have faded away and only Jesus remains. Others say that this passage fulfills the traditional expectation that the prophetic age had to end before the Messiah was to come. The greatest representatives of this prophetic tradition have come and now Jesus is free to start his walk to Jerusalem. Others say that this event took place for the sake of the chosen disciples who may still have been doubting Jesus’ claims of divinity. There are many other interpretations given, and I believe that all these interpretations are true.

This great episode does in fact fulfill prophesy, provide irrefutable proof of Jesus’ divinity, and strengthen the faith of the Disciples (The Gethsemane episode not withstanding). I would like to concentrate on one possible explanation coming today directly from Holy Scripture, and this interpretation makes full use of my early story about thunder and lightning. Every time God speaks in Holy Scripture you need to pay attention to the reason for the speech. When God speaks twice, using the same words, you really must pay attention to the context. We have heard the thunderous words,

"This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" before. You may recall the episode of Jesus’ baptism, when the same words are heard by those standing by. You may recall that immediately following the words, Jesus is taken to the desert to be tempted and to suffer the agony of hunger and thirst for forty days and forty nights. Could the voice today be the sign that another episode of agony is about to happen next? The answer is “Yes!” At the mount of Transfiguration Jesus looks towards Jerusalem and he knows that he must start his walk to the great city, a walk to his death, a walk to his sacrifice on the cross.

This tradition of the Prophet of God coming to the mountain to experience an “Epiphany” at a moment of discouragement or at a crucial time in their ministry is well known in Scripture. An “Epiphany” is a vision of God, an appearance of God in either physical or spiritual form. To us Christians, Epiphany is the moment when Jesus is revealed to the Gentile kings who come to visit him after his birth. You may recall that the words “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” mark the beginning and the end of the ordinary time we call “After Epiphany.”

Now, I say that this tradition is well established in Scripture. Let me give you several examples, using both Moses and Elijah. You may recall the episode of the people’s rejection of Moses when they were wondering in the desert. The people are hungry and thirsty, and they blame Moses for their problems. They are about to lynch him. Moses goes up to the mountain in utter discouragement (Exodus 33:18ff.) God appears to him in a great cloud and speaks to him. After the conversation, God sends Moses back to his people to continue his work, his struggle, his ministry. Elijah, likewise, comes to the mountain as a persecuted man. He is hunted by queen Jezebel’s army for prophesying against the king. The nation is flushed with prophets to Baal, a pagan deity, and only Elijah remains as a prophet of the Lord (1 Kings 19:1ff.) God appears to him and listens to his concerns. After the apparition, God sends Elijah back to his struggle, his mission, and his ministry. In both of those episodes the appearance of God in the clouds or in the great silence is quite extraordinary. Today’s appearance in the great dazzling white cloud is equally as extraordinary.

God appears to Jesus, at a time of great distress, when Jesus knows that he must walk to Jerusalem to die. The thunder is both an announcement of death, but also encouragement and strengthening. The role of Moses and Elijah when they appear on the mount fulfills what Scripture says about the Messiah who was to come. The Law and the Prophets bear witness to the Messiah. As Moses and Elijah had to come down from the mountain and go back to the struggle, the Messiah will have to come down from this mountain and go back to his own struggle. As it was promised to Moses and Elijah, however, God’s own presence will be with his Son to the end, but the Messiah’s mission cannot be avoided. He must go to Jerusalem and he must die. This is his mission, and he must be on his way.

Often, we chuckle at Peter’s words in this passage. We say or think “Peter puts his foot in his mouth again.” Or “Peter acts impulsively again.” But, maybe, Peter fully understood the meaning of what was taking place on this mountain. Perhaps he was able to understand that the thunderous voice of God meant death and suffering for Jesus. Perhaps it is for this reason that he wants to build tents. He wants to stay here and refuse death. He has tried to prevent this death before (Mark 8:32), only to be rebuked by Jesus. Perhaps he is overcome with emotion and fear at the prospect of death. After all, just a few days before Jesus announced his own death for the first time when he told them: “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31.) Peter is afraid of the thunder because the thunder means death and sacrifice.

My friends God shows his love for us today in the fact that his son did not stay on that mountain. He chose to come down and fight the powers of evil. He chose to come down and face death. He chose to suffer that we may be freed from the bonds of our sin. As we enter Lent this coming week, we will be presented with the story of his walk to Jerusalem. And during Holy Week we will be reminded of his great suffering for our sake. Every Good Friday I wonder what would have happened if Christ had stayed on that mountain. As I see the mobs spitting at him, I almost wish he had stayed on that

mountain. When I see the bone-encrusted lashes tearing his skin, I almost wish he had stayed on that mountain. When I see the nails penetrate flesh and bone, I almost wish he had stayed on that mountain.

But if Jesus had stayed on that mountain, we would remain hopelessly bound by our chains. If he had stayed on that mountain, we would be all alone, left to our own devices, helplessly trying to save ourselves. If he stayed on that mountain we would still be engulfed by darkness and despair. The good news today is that Jesus chooses to come down from that mountain, not because the people at the bottom were perfect, but because he loved us perfectly. I pray that as we walk with Jesus to Jerusalem this Lent, we too may agree to come down from our mountains into the fight below, knowing that our crosses are bearable because he walks with us. I pray that we allow Jesus to change us from the inside out this Lent. May he who chose to die for you bless you this Lent and may you allow his death to lead you into resurrection. Amen!