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February 23, 2020- Last Sunday After Epiphany- A
Given at St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; **Matthew 17:1-9**

**“We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you
the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ,
but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty.” †**

Once again, as we end the season after Epiphany, we hear the story of the Transfiguration... that mystical and probably discomfiting scene on the mountaintop. We can only imagine what it might have been like, as we hear the words from Mathew's gospel, 'he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white.' The Greek word he uses (*stilbein/ stilbonta*) is more like a shining glare; the blinding reflection the sun has off polished gold, silver, or brass, something difficult to look at. This is augmented by the fact that a 'bright cloud overshadowed them' (recall God approached the Israelites and became present among them in the form of a cloud). It must have been overwhelming and certainly confusing, as evidenced by Peter's response.

All of this takes place just after Jesus has told his disciples in Chapter 16 that it is necessary for him to undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised (16.21). Its important to keep this in mind, as we try to understand why he tells them on the way down after the event, not to tell anyone what they had seen. It seems very strange... the disciples just saw a glorious, powerful event, and they can't tell anyone. Perhaps the reason for this is that Jesus knew quite well that they, and most Jews in that region at the time, still had an incorrect notion of 'Messiah.' Their understanding was all about 'power and might,' and if the disciples started sharing the story of the mountaintop—of God appearing in a cloud and Moses and Elijah returning—it would encourage the popular belief that the Messiah was to rule in power, instead of suffer in humility.

His disciples still had to learn what 'Messiahship' meant, and he was the only one who could teach them this, the only one able to explain about the Cross and the Resurrection to come. Once they saw what the Cross meant for the Messiah, His willingness to give Himself for others. And once they experienced the resurrection, ushering in new life and the reversal of death, then, and *only then*, could they see that being Messiah is not about releasing God's power, but about humbly sharing God's love. Thus, only after grasping this, seeing him raised from the dead, could they ever tell others about that mountaintop experience.

The prevailing Jewish thought about the coming of the Messiah, as supported by stories like that of Elijah's return in 2nd Kings or the prophecy of Malachi (4.5-6) is that Elijah would return, 'the Voice' that would declare the coming majesty of the Messiah: On the 1st day he would cry out: 'Peace come into the world.' And peace would come. On the 2nd day, he would cry: 'Good come into the world.' And good would come. And on the 3rd day, he would cry: '*Jeshua* (salvation) come into the

world.' And salvation would come. The Messiah would restore all things, cleanse the fallen nation, and mend the broken people. It was supposed to be a sweep of power and majesty... and yet, that's not what happened.

The Transfiguration was a valuable experience for both Jesus and his disciples. Jesus, as we read earlier in Matthew, had just made his decision to go on to Jerusalem... to go on his own exodus.... to face and accept suffering and death on the Cross. And Moses (the leader in the exodus of Chosen People) along with Elijah (the greatest prophet who was to usher in the Messianic age) both became present to Jesus. Their presence was an affirmation for Jesus: 'Go on! Do what you know you must do!' Not only that, but God spoke from the cloud to Jesus, 'This is my son, my beloved!' 'Go on Jesus, you're right!' This event assures Jesus that he had not chosen the wrong path, but convinces him of the rightness of the Cross.

For the disciples, this event— as incomprehensible and confusing as it must have been (again, evidenced by Peter's gut reaction to make dwellings, to freeze the moment and stay there permanently)— their observance of Jesus mingling with Moses and Elijah, and of Jesus' total transformation before their eyes, demonstrated the power and glory of God. It gave them something unique to hold onto. Cross or no Cross, they saw the prophets, they heard God's voice acknowledge what they had suspected, "this is my Son." And the experience proved to them that, indeed, Jesus was the Messiah. The dilemma, as I noted earlier, is that they still did not know what Messiah ought to be.

This event made them *special witnesses* of the glory of Christ, as noted throughout their writings in the New Testament: "We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain" (2 Peter 1.18). They were Jesus' witnesses. Witnesses are people who first see, then are able to show others. And so, they were called to lead others to Jesus Christ, but only at the proper time, only when they were prepared, and only when they had learned what Messiah ought to be.

Okay, so what does the Transfiguration have to do with us in Bridgewater? I wonder whether we are not similar to the disciples? We often bring our own perceptions of the way things are supposed to be that we miss seeing what God is showing us. Like the disciples, we too have many preconceived notions and ideas about who God should be, about how God should act, and what God's Church should look like. We worry about the chaos in the world and tend to dwell on why we are not getting what we expect (better attendance at our services, more people joining our parish, more easily managed property and finances), while we may actually be missing the point of what God expects. What concepts of God and God's Church do we need to let go of, and what features do we need to find the courage to embrace? Today's scriptures tell us it involves joining Jesus on the exodus! And that it may involve suffering and sacrifice, and it will also lead to resurrection and new life!

My hope is that this Lent each of us will prayerfully engage with God. By prayer and contemplation together, may we become disciples, followers and join His exodus and His journey. May we be open to experience a 'Transfiguration' event in our own time... one that brings us change and new life... that we may become witnesses that

fellowship is not about numbers, but relationship, and life not about great power, but great love.

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