

2nd Sunday of Lent, 5 March 2023

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1-4a; 2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9

Homily: Fr. Ken

Every Lent we hear the Gospel account of the mountaintop story of Jesus and his disciples. Last year we listened to the version of the story from the Gospel of St. Luke. This year the mountaintop story comes to us from the Gospel of St. Mathew.

And this year again we recall that in our own United States history, one of the most famous "mountaintop experiences" in our time is that of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He spoke about it in his famous "mountaintop speech" delivered in Memphis, Tennessee on April 3, 1968, during a civil rights protest.

As it turned out, that speech was his very last. He was assassinated the following day. In the context of the Gospel story, we can rightfully reflect on it once again.

The speech of Martin Luther King Jr. climaxed with these words: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And God has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land".

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King compared his situation to that of Moses, who was appointed by God to lead the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the promised land. After a lifetime of service,

Moses himself would die without reaching that promised land, but God did grant him a glimpse of it.

Dr. King's speech made all the difference to his friends and to the civil rights movement in the weeks after his assassination. It prepared them for the trauma that was soon to come. It assured them that King was not simply a victim of circumstances but that his death was somehow part of God's plan in the long struggle for liberation, particularly for the Black community.

In today's Gospel, the mountaintop experience gives Jesus' disciples a glimpse of the heavenly glory before they go on to witness Jesus' shameful death as a public criminal.

Just as Martin Luther King's speech prepared his followers for his death, so the transfiguration prepared Jesus and his followers for what was to come.

Mountains, in religious literature, were places where the human could touch the divine. At the top of that mountain with Jesus, the apostles witness his divinity revealed, but they also glimpse his purpose as a bringer of liberation. It is significant that Jesus does not meet with Aaron the priest, who was the interpreter of the law, or with David the king, the defender of the state. Instead, Jesus identifies with the prophets. He appears with Moses and Elijah: Moses, who led the people out of oppression; and Elijah, whom King Ahab called "troubler ["disturber"] of Israel, because he condemned the people's compromise between true and false gods.

In a Gospel reading apparently focusing on the mystical dimension of religion, where the voice of God is heard, there is a message about Jesus' mission to transform the world. There is an undercurrent of turmoil. The story shows a tension between two attitudes of religion. Peter says, "Let us make three tents", wanting to hang on to the moment of transcendence, to stay on the mountaintop, away from the concerns of everyday life. But God's voice calls for humanity to listen to Jesus; and Jesus

chooses another path—he takes the disciples down from the mountain to meet needy people in the nearest town.

Certainly, there are times for contemplative withdrawal from everyday life; and we should value those times as Jesus did. But today's Gospel also presents us with a challenge to engage with the world around us and help it for the better.

Religion is not so much about building temples and shrines, as it is about healing broken hearts and bringing liberation to people who are poor and vulnerable. Jesus calls us to come down from the mountain and out of our church buildings, and to work for justice and peace, and a sustainable environment.

Every time we are willing to let go of who we think we are and what we think we know, to lose our lives in order to find life, we are participating in the story of the transfiguration. The fear is this story is real, but so is the hope.

We are called to open our eyes and see Jesus for who he really is, the Christ. He calls us to work to transform the world by following his teaching and example, and by showing compassion for marginalized people at the very fringes of mainstream society.

Perhaps, then, we can follow the example of Martin Luther King, who was inspired by his religious faith to devote his life to social justice, even giving his life for it.

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