

Living Faith

WHERE FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN OUR EVERYDAY LIVES

Week One - Rededicating Ourselves to the Spirit of Encounter

Opening Prayer - Transfiguration Prayer (Revised Common Lectionary)

Holy God, mighty and immortal,
you are beyond our knowing,
yet we see your glory in the face of Jesus Christ,
whose compassion illumines the world.
Transform us into the likeness of the love of Christ,
who renewed our humanity so that we may share in his divinity,
the same Jesus Christ, our Lord,
who live and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Introduction

- Themes
 - Transfiguration
 - Missionary Discipleship
 - Change
- Quiet Reflection
 - Jesus is always extending invitations to us. He invites us to accompany him on an amazing journey. He invites us to be a part of an experience that will bring us closer to God. And he invites us to make a deeper commitment, to become missionary disciples.
- Brief Discussion

- What does being a disciple mean to you?
 - What are the greatest challenges to living out discipleship in our world today?
What can you do to maintain a spirit of discipleship?
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Reading - Matthew 17:1-9 "The Transfiguration"

Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother,
and led them up a high mountain by themselves.
And he was transfigured before them;
his face shone like the sun
and his clothes became white as light.
And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them,
conversing with him.
Then Peter said to Jesus in reply,
"Lord, it is good that we are here.
If you wish, I will make three tents here,
one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."
While he was still speaking, behold,
a bright cloud cast a shadow over them,
then from the cloud came a voice that said,
"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased;
listen to him."
When the disciples heard this, they fell prostrate
and were very much afraid.
But Jesus came and touched them, saying,
"Rise, and do not be afraid."
And when the disciples raised their eyes,
they saw no one else but Jesus alone.

As they were coming down from the mountain,
Jesus charged them,
"Do not tell the vision to anyone
until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Fr. Foppiano's Reflection

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ptQ3pKWtzo8&t=8s>

Introduction and Review

Welcome to week #2 of LivingFaith! By now I hope that you have settled into Lent and found a rhythm of both what you are getting rid of in your life – those things you have given up for Lent – and what you are adding – such as being part of this group or perhaps more prayer time, acts of charity, and the like. If you feel like you haven't gotten into a rhythm yet, that's okay – there's still plenty of Lent left to go!

Our homily series and our LivingFaith series are about the encounters which take place in each week's Gospel readings. We will be reflecting on how these encounters effect both our own personal spiritual lives and the communal life of our St. Agnes and St. William of York community. We are attempting to grow ourselves and our personal relationship with God and our community's commitment to our Mission, Vision, and Purpose.

Before moving on to this week's encounter, let's take a moment to review the ground we have already covered.

Last week we reflected on two encounters with the devil. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden fell prey to a false encounter with the evil one. They trusted in his deception, rather than their encounter with God, and sin entered the world. Jesus, on the other hand, recognized the devil for who he was and, putting his faith firmly in God his Father, resisted the devil's temptations despite being physically, spiritually, and mentally exhausted.

These encounters remind us that we too are susceptible to the false enticements of the evil one. He likes to prey on our weaknesses and convince us that what God asks is not the best for us. So much of our sin consists in reaching for

something that we think will bring us happiness, but once we have it, we realize that it has done just the opposite and left us emptier than we were before.

In regards to the life of our St. Agnes and St. William of York community there are plenty of temptations which consist mostly in remaining where we are simply because we are comfortable. We reflected last week on how God's Holy Spirit should be impelling us to move forward and to pick up our call to be missionary disciples.

The encounters which we reflect upon in the readings for the Second Sunday of Lent help us to go a little bit deeper in our understanding of this forward movement which we should have as disciples and which should mark the life of our community.

Abram

The Book of Genesis tells us that Abram was 75 years old when he left his home with his family to go to an unknown destination that that Lord would reveal to him.¹ I would venture to say that many of us would not be keen on picking up our lives, and our families, and moving to an unknown place at any age and certainly not when we're 75.

I find one of the most difficult aspects of the Priesthood is the moving from assignment to assignment. I don't like to move. Getting used to new surroundings is uncomfortable. After I was transferred to my second assignment, the summer after I arrived, we moved from the rectory on the parish grounds to a house in the neighborhood. Then the summer after that I was transferred here to St. Agnes and St. William of York. I moved three times in the course of three years – it was not fun! So I imagine that Abram might have hesitated a bit but he did what God asked of him.

God promises to make of Abram a great nation and that all the communities of the earth will bless him if he takes this leap of faith. God asks Abram to trust in his faithfulness. It is through this encounter with God that Abram has the courage to travel many miles until he reaches the land that God promised him.

How often do we find that when we take a leap of faith we are rewarded? Going outside of our comfort zones brings blessings. All of those moves that I told you about brought me many blessings: a new assignment, a nice new rectory to live in, my arrival here to become pastor. If I had my druthers I would have said "No, thank you" because I didn't want the bother of moving. But because I made a

¹ Genesis 12:4.

promise of obedience I did what I was asked to do and God blessed that willingness beyond measure.

The Church can also be a comfortable place. This is a good thing. We feel at home in our parish church. We are comforted by our faith. We receive strength to make it through our week. The ritual of being in church is comforting: sitting, standing, kneeling, singing. Remember a few years ago when many of the prayers and responses of the Mass changed? The way some people were reacting you would have thought that the world was coming to an end. Why? Because we are comfortable in church and when we are comfortable we resist change. And this resistance is not a good thing.

Unfortunately we have seen all around us the results of a resistance to change on behalf of those in the church. Over the last generation Mass attendance has been falling steadily. The second largest denomination in this country are people who identify as “former Catholics.” There’s a whole generation of what are called “nones” – they subscribe to no particular faith tradition. There are many reasons for this – reasons both internal to the Church and those outside the Church. We’re all aware of them and my point is not to get into a prolonged discussion about those reasons. I bring this point to suggest that perhaps God is calling us to move beyond our comfort zones. Perhaps he is asking us to take a step out into the deep and break through what is comfortable in order to witness to the Gospel message in the 21st century.

Missionary Discipleship

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, introduced the new term “missionary disciple” in his Apostolic Exhortation on evangelization, “The Joy of the Gospel.” It’s a phrase that we’ve incorporated into the Vision for St. Agnes and St. William of York. It’s a phrase which encapsulates the entire teaching of the Church in the modern age about evangelization from the Second Vatican Council down to Pope Francis.

Our Vision says that we are “missionary disciples motivated by the love of God” and that we invite to discipleship by inviting others to encounter Christ. Our Vision is meant to be a picture of the future that produces excitement within us and what is more exciting than encountering the living Christ and having the Lord dwell within us?

This excitement of discipleship then spurs us on to be missionary. Speaking about Jesus is what a missionary disciple does. Our community welcomes others by sharing with them what we have first encountered.

Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on evangelization said: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses."² People can choose to ignore truth claims. They can choose to be turned off by institutions that appear to "control" the behavior of their members. But our personal witness cannot as easily be discounted. Why do so many people love Mother Teresa? It is because of the personal witness of how she lived her life. No person of good will could look at what she did and discount the importance of faith in her life. Pope Paul continues: "It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus - the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity."

So when we give our personal witness what do we say? Our first temptation might be to give a catechesis or an apology for the Faith. We might worry that we are not the most eloquent of speakers or the most comfortable sharing our personal life. Or the most intelligent person. What we share is the fundamental message of encounter with Jesus. We call this the "kerygma." Kerygma is a Greek word that means "first proclamation." And it is first not in terms of chronology (as if at some point we move past it) but first in terms of it being the most important and the reference point for everything else that follows. St. Pope John Paul describes the kerygma as follows: "...Christ who was crucified, died, and is risen: through him is accomplished our full and authentic liberation from evil, sin and death; through him God bestows 'new life' that is divine and eternal. This is the 'Good News' which changes man and his history, and which all peoples have a right to hear."³ The kerygma is the announcement of the Good News of Jesus Christ who became man for you and me so that the lives we live now can be transformed through grace and so that we can live with God forever. This is what we say in one form or another through our witness.

Transfiguration

As missionary disciples we want to be continually learning to appreciate and love this good news in our own lives and introduce it to others. Fr. James Mallon in his book *Divine Renovation* says: "Jesus Christ must be proposed anew! We must break through the invisible suits of armor that so many in our pews wear. We must labour to create spaces for people to come to know Jesus as the living

² *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #41.

³ *Redemptoris Missio*, #44.

Lord, awaken that hunger and then begin to form them, to make them disciples.”⁴

That is the kind of encounter that we seek and that we heard about in this Sunday’s Gospel story of the Transfiguration. Peter, James, and John go up the mountain with Jesus where he is transfigured. The veil which hid the Lord’s glory was pulled away and they saw Jesus’ divinity. In this encounter they saw the glory of the second person of the Blessed Trinity.

The Lord warns Peter, James, and John not to tell anyone about this encounter until he has been raised from the dead because they had much more to go through with the Lord. But we, on the other hand, should be ready to come down from the mountain and speak about what we have seen and experienced. Our encounters with Jesus make us want to be witnesses. This is the “missionary” component of missionary discipleship.

Conclusion

We’ve covered a lot of ground in this presentation. Perhaps we’re feeling a bit overwhelmed. When I think about how big the mission field is and how much work there is to be done I get slightly overwhelmed too. But rather than focusing on that feeling, let me focus us on three questions for our consideration:

1. How do we take the veil away to see the glory of the Lord in our own lives so to grow in our own personal discipleship?
2. How do we help others to hear the kerygma and so encounter the Lord?
3. How do we begin to pierce the suits of armor that Fr. Mallon talked about?

This is all part of moving beyond our own comfort zones and the collective comfort zone of the church. Sometimes we think of talking about Jesus as being too Protestant but it’s not! The mission of the Catholic Church from day one has been to announce the Good News of Jesus. If we are going to reverse the trends of the last generation it is clear that something different must be done. God promises a blessing to Abram if he trusts him; God promises the same if we are willing to take a step out into the unknown.

I will leave you today with a metaphor from Fr. Mallon:

⁴ P. 23.

“We exist for mission. Like Jesus, we have been sent to ‘seek and save’ those who are perishing, and there are plenty of seats available in the lifeboats. Yet, so often as a Church, we sit at a safe distance, more concerned with our own needs and comfort. Perhaps if a few people swam over to us, we would help them, but going to them? This is not just a question of our comfort zones being challenged – it is totally outside our frame of reference, because we have so thoroughly forgotten our identity. Lifeboats exist to rescue people. So does the Church. We maintain our lifeboats, we paint them, we serve the people in them and keep them in good order and hold card socials, but we do not use them for the purpose for which they were created. Any crew member who would dare to disrupt life on the lifeboat will quickly hear a chorus of complaints from the passengers who are adverse to being inconvenienced in any way. We lament the tragedy of the loss of faith, secularization, church closures and so on, but it does not occur to us to pick up the oars and row.”⁵

May God bless you throughout this week.

Group Discussion

- Recall a time when you had to make a leap of faith. How was it difficult for you to put your trust in God? How did that leap of faith help you in your journey?
- What do you think are the greatest obstacles to living as a missionary disciple?
- The apostles encountered the divine in a new way on the mountain. What opportunities do we have to encounter the divine in the world today?

Wayne’s Reflection - Coming Down from the Mountain

Wayne Hipley is the Pastoral Associate for Faith Formation and Youth Ministry of St. Agnes and St. William of York

Each year I facilitate a number of retreats for adults and young people. There are two basic types of retreats I lead. One is designed to be instructional or catechetical in nature, such as a Confirmation retreat. The other is designed more around exciting something in the spirit, creating an environment where a deeper relationship or connection with God can be achieved. These types of retreats are often referred to as “mountaintop experiences.” I take some groups

⁵ Divine Renovation, p. 18.

to a lodge in Pennsylvania that is literally on the side of a mountain, which enhances this idea in the minds of the participants.

We all want to have a mountaintop experience. We want to have that moment of epiphany, where everything clicks. The big "AH-HA!" moment. The moment of clarity and discovery and connection. It's euphoric. It's amazing when you're in the moment, but like all mountaintop experiences, there also comes that time when you must come down from the mountain.

This was true of the apostles that accompanied Jesus to the mountain. It could be seen as a retreat experience - fulfilling the need to get away, pray, rest, recharge the batteries for the work ahead. And could there ever be a better retreat leader than Jesus? And like many of the people I have shared retreat experiences with the apostles were ready to dig in, pitch tents and stay indefinitely. And why not? Who wants to willingly walk away from such an amazing experience?

But come down from the mountain we must. And the question, the challenge for each of us, as it was for the apostles is "What do we do now?" How do we take that mountaintop experience and live it out? How do we move from being passive (but joyful) participants to enthusiastic missionary disciples?

The expectation that Jesus had of the apostles was twofold: deepen in your love of God, and deepen in your love of others. Living out that love as disciples is where it gets messy. It's easy enough to say we love others as God desires, but it's another thing to actually live out that love. It means stepping outside of our comfort zones. It means encountering others in a manner we never have before. It means coming down from the mountain and through our words and actions share the "mountaintop experience" with the world, one encounter at a time. And then, like the apostles who were sent out two by two, we also become missionary disciples.

Group Discussion

- When have you had a "mountaintop experience"? What did you do to try to live out that feeling after coming down from the mountain?
- What is your "takeaway" today? What stood out to you? What challenged you?
- In the week ahead, how can you apply what you heard today to your life and your interactions with others?

Closing

- The apostles had a spectacular opportunity to encounter the divinity of God in a way they never could have imagined. That encounter helped them understand their call to missionary discipleship. Like the apostles, we are also called. We are called to be disciples of invitation. We are called to be disciples that seek God out in unexpected places. And we are called to be missionary disciples - disciples that proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world.

- Scripture verse (Matthew 17:9)

As they were coming down from the mountain,
Jesus charged them,
"Do not tell the vision to anyone
until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

- Closing Prayer - (A Prayer for the Transfiguration)

At the Transfiguration, Father, You showed
Jesus in glory, a glimpse of what His disciples
would see in His risen life.

Bless us in our humanity,
with an awareness of Your presence,
leading us to share in Your divine life
even in our daily struggle.

Help us to deepen
our knowledge of the Law and the Prophets,
channels of Your grace throughout history,
and signposts for our journey.

Amen.