

Grace Church, Alexandria, VA
Last Sunday after the Epiphany - February 7, 2016

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Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99:1-5, 9; 2 Corinthians 3:12—4:2; Luke 19:28-36

Today, as in every year on the Sunday before Lent begins, we hear the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus – when, soon before he makes his way to Jerusalem and his Passion, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain. And there, a flicker, a tiny hint of his true divine glory is revealed to his disciples as Jesus changes. Scripture says, “the appearance of his face changed” in some manner the three disciples apparently found impossible to describe, and his clothes become dazzling white.

A dramatic spectacle occurs. The disciples are overcome by this transformed vision of Jesus and by the cloud of God’s presence that suddenly appears around them, terrifying them. And yet all this drama and majesty is only the faintest glimmer of God’s full glory.

And the verse that jumped out at me as I read this passage this week is this: “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, *but since they had stayed awake*, they saw his glory.”

That sentence immediately brought to my mind the memory of another night, not long after this one, where Jesus takes his three friends to a garden, and as he prays heart-wrenchingly that the cup might pass from him, Peter, James, and John fall asleep.

But not today. Today, even though the three are weighed down with weariness, they do not fall asleep. They watch, and they see the glory of God. They withstand the distraction of sleepiness and are able to glimpse God’s glory.

It’s interesting to me that this story is always the story in the week before Lent. Perhaps it’s because this story shows us the goal and the path we may follow as we walk through the holy season of Lent. We, too, may glimpse the story of God if we can just watch, pay attention, and lay aside our distractions.

I love Lent, in fact it is my favorite season of the year. And the reason for that is that I can really feel how it calls me to renew my focus on God. Lent calls me to make time to focus on God, to talk or commune with God in prayer, and to turn aside from the myriad distractions that draw my heart and my mind away from God.

Lent calls me back to prayer, and simplicity, and focus. And every year, as I start this season fresh, I get excited, because I believe that this refocusing will lead me to a renewed relationship with God and a renewed awareness of God’s presence, and love, and glory.

So now, before Lent begins this Wednesday, we are invited to consider what will help us to “stay awake” – or perhaps even wake up! – so that we may glimpse the glory of God.

What might help you renew your focus on your relationship with God? A set time each day for prayer? Regular Scripture reading? A book to work through this season by an author who is able to inspire your mind or rekindle your heart with love and desire for God?

Or seeking and serving Christ in others? Perhaps making extra time for a family member or friend who needs some love and encouragement. Or serving those in need in our local community. Or giving for the needs of the world. What might nurture the growth of love – for God and your neighbor – in your heart?

Or what might you need to lay aside – at least for a season – that distracts your mind or your heart from seeking God? Are there mental habits you need to break, like gossip, or criticism, or grudge-holding, that hurt your ability to feel love?

Are there distractions in your life that fill up your time? I can always recognize what is becoming too consuming or addicting or distracting in my life when I tell myself, “now is a good time to pray” and then watch for that immediate desire for something else. I’ll think, “Oh, I want to watch that show”, or play that computer or video game, or feed that social media addiction - which I think is becoming one of the most overwhelming distractions of our time. My iPhone screen is a little graphical display of the distractions I fill my mind and my time with, often to the impoverishment of other areas of my life.

Whatever those distractions are – and they can be very different for different people, these are the things we should think of if we are considering “giving something up for Lent”. These are things we might set aside or limit, at least for a season, to make more time for God.

Ever-popular as they are as Lenten sacrifices, chocolate and sweets are really just not that likely to draw our hearts away from God! There’s actually nothing that prevents a person from simultaneously eating chocolate and saying a prayer. Actually, a better Lenten discipline might be – *eat* chocolate, but say a prayer every time you do it!

In our Old Testament reading today we hear of Moses, coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in his hands and his face glowing. This is an image that just fascinates me – that every time Moses talked to God, the skin of his face would shine. Something changed in Moses because of his conversations with God, whom, the Bible tells us, Moses spoke to “face to face, as a man speaks with his friend”. I love that the transformation Moses experienced in every heart-to-heart with God was physically apparent in him – it was that concrete and noticeable of a transformation.

And I love how it matches the story of Jesus’ transfiguration. Jesus, the son of God, *his* face changed to reveal a hint of his true appearance on the mountaintop as light began to shine dazzlingly from him. And Moses, a mere mortal, reflected that same glory in his face. Moses reflected the glory of God in his own body, like the shining moon reflects the light of the sun.

That’s an amazing and inspiring analog to how we might be transformed by regular, focused intimacy with God. That is the kind of transformation – internal, if not visible! – I hope for and pray for each one of us in this coming holy season of turning to God.