

Blessed be the Name of the Lord, from henceforth and for evermore.

The season after the Epiphany in the Church year is the time in which we reflect upon how Jesus manifests himself to us in the witness of the Gospel storytellers – we read first about Jesus at his Baptism in the Jordan River, the first moment in which the reality of Jesus as God's Chosen One is proclaimed publicly.

Throughout the intervening weeks, we have heard various accounts in Mark's Gospel where those who experienced Jesus' ministry came to know him as the Christ, the Son of God.

The season after Epiphany may have begun in the muddy currents of the Jordan River, but it ends on the mountaintop. And such a weird story it is: God's presence comes upon them in a cloud, Jesus starts to glow, the ghosts of a patriarch and a prophet show up to talk with them. It's as if God has called them all up there to underline the truth proclaimed first at Jesus' baptism, and then experienced by those who came to confess Jesus as the Christ – that Jesus, himself, is indeed the Son of God, and as such, it would behoove us to listen well to what he has to say. It's as if God, trying to get our attention, is pointing at Jesus and saying: "Hey, y'all. This is what it's all about, right here."

From the river to the mountain. That is our Epiphany journey. Again and again God comes to us to show us who God is, to reveal his own glory in the person of Jesus – will we come to confess him, as did Nathanael, that he is our Savior and Lord? Who do we say that he is? Who is this Jesus, and how does he figure in OUR lives?

If mountaintop experiences in Scripture have a common thread, it's this: that they necessarily come to an end. Nobody ever stays up on the mountain – though, clearly, the tendency is to want to remain in that moment, the high of the mountaintop experience. Peter and James and John certainly wanted to – after all, they suggested setting up camp there. I can't say that I much blame them – finally, up on the mountain, the future and the past all make a kind of perfect sense. God's presence manifests in a radiant moment. The doubts and insecurities that Peter and James and John must've felt, perhaps, from time to time, all have vanished in the clarity of the present moment. I can only begin to imagine what that must've felt like – but even the strange beauty of the Transfiguration necessarily ends. The light fades, the glow wears off, and the usual preoccupations of day-to-day life return to view.

As we turn our attention toward our Lenten journey, beginning this week with the observance of Ash Wednesday, we will likewise experience a descent from the mountaintop experience of Christmastide, basking the past few weeks in its glow through the weeks after Epiphany. The season of Lent carries with it a kind of weight – even, dare I say, a sense of dread. I don't know many folks who would name Lent as their favorite time of the Church year. Lent is definitely not a time of peak church attendance – it stands to reason, I suppose, because in all the stress of day to day life, we prefer to be cheered up, not bummed out, when we go to the trouble of attending church on a rainy Sunday morning.

I think, though, that there is something refreshingly honest and possibly even cleansing about the journey of Lent. It tells us the truth about ourselves, and about the world we live in – and in a time when social media algorithms and news

sources customized to affirm our preconceived ideas, when what's true is an individualized reality, I don't know about you but I need a little truth in my life these days. Even, I suppose, if it's a hard truth.

Lent is a time not only of penitence, but also one of almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. We begin by reminding ourselves, this Wednesday, that we are mortal – from dust to dust. Focusing ourselves on penitence, we are confronted – again and again – with the reality of our dependence upon God, and God's goodness and mercy. We recognize something undoubtedly broken in the world – and recognize that brokenness as well within our own hearts.

Some take on a spiritual discipline during the season of Lent – giving up some personal luxury, for some it is a kind of self-denial. For others, it may be taking up a new commitment to daily prayer, to engaging in ministry and service, or reading the Bible with regularity. When I'm faced each year with the choice of giving up something for Lent, I can't help but think of my friend Ashley, and a memorable encounter from a cold Sunday morning in March a couple of years ago.

It was one of those mornings, I guess – the sacristy had an air of tension about it, as several of the morning acolytes had not yet arrived, and it was getting on toward service time. Ashley arrived at ten-minutes to nine, a bit disheveled, with his five-year-old in tow – as he removed his jacket and put on his cassock and cotta, I couldn't help but notice how tired he looked. His eyes were red and puffy; his hair a tangled nest of bed head. He apologized profusely for coming in late. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said. "We had a hard time getting going this morning."

I replied that I hoped everything was okay – I mentioned to him that he looked like perhaps he was coming down with something. A cold, maybe?

“No,” he said. “I gave up a few things for Lent this year,” he explained. “Sugar, meat, alcohol, and caffeine... || I’m honestly not sure I’m going to make it.”

I gasped. “All at ONCE?”

I admit it: looking at Ashley that morning, with his sunken eyes and apparent exhaustion, I thought, “better you than me, buddy.” I was inwardly glad that Lenten fasts are on the “optional” list for Episcopalians. If Lenten fasts follow the maxim of “all may, some should, none must” then I’ve tended to take the easy way out. “NONE MUST.” Phew. Off the hook! I mean, Life is hard enough: why spend six weeks punishing myself? I’ve often thought.

And so it is that there is a certain irony to find myself preaching on this, the Last Sunday after the Epiphany: I, who have taken the easy road through Lenten seasons past, coasting on through while people of apparently much stonger faith than I have undergone great deprivations. I, the one who the day after Ash Wednesday tends to think, “What? Is it Lent already? Well, it’s too late to fast this year...maybe next year, I’ll be organized enough – grown up enough – to actually consider entering into Lent with a purpose.” I, who came up with a very clever Lenten fast a few years back, announcing it to my friends on social media: “This year, I’m giving up...giving up things for Lent...for Lent.”

(pause)

These last few days of the season after the Epiphany provide us with a moment to pause, to consider the spare and subdued season we are about to enter, and to think about what we might make of this Lent, THIS year. Very few of us, I would venture to guess, prefer Lent – I mean, penitence. What a bummer, right? Over the next weeks, we will begin each service with the Penitential Order, and the first thing we do will be to confess our sins. Yuck. By the time Lent ends, we are more than ready to embrace the unabashed joy of Easter. And, in a sense, that's part of what it's for – so that when we follow Jesus from the entrance to Jerusalem to his arrest and trial and crucifixion – that by the time the tomb is discovered empty at Easter, and Christ is proclaimed indeed alive at the Easter Vigil – we are LONGING for it.

Perhaps, all along, we've been looking at this coming season in entirely the wrong way. What if we saw Lent as inherently joyful? The joy in the Lenten journey comes out of its recognition of penitence as a journey of freedom – freedom from slavery to sin, freedom from the just consequence of eternal death, freedom to be, in Jesus Christ, led out of bondage and into his marvelous light. To repent is to turn – to turn away from oppression, to turn away from bondage, to turn away from all that tries to separate us from knowing the God who created us.

My friends, as we turn our sights toward the Lenten journey before us, I invite you to join me in jumping in with both feet. May we greet the path before us with joy, with intention, and with purpose; the path of repentance is one that is ultimately joyful – because we do not have to remain in bondage to sin. As we descend the mountain from the joyful glow of Epiphany's light to the joy – yes, joy – of a truthful and faithful Lent, God is indeed with us.