

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In just three short days from today, we will enter the liturgical season of Lent on Ash Wednesday. When we are all reminded that “we are but dust, and to dust we shall return.” Causing us to focus attention upon the frailty and temporary nature of our bodily existence on earth. To think about all the things we usually think are so important and urgent, and how really meaningless it all is.

Compare that focus with what the scriptures reveal today...both in the story of the description of Moses, as well as the later images of the transfiguration of Jesus.

When one sees what is real, but what is not obvious for anyone else to see, there is a kind of strength that comes with it...a kind of power. This was the kind of power that allowed St. Paul to sit in prison, with broken legs, awaiting his execution, as he sang praises to God and filled the terrible prison he was in with joy.

In the gospel for today, there is an external reality that stood in sharp contrast to the deeper reality that could only be seen through the eyes of faith and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. This gospel tells us of a time in the life of Jesus when the power that was usually known only through its effects was, all-of-the-sudden, made visible in a flash. The power that could heal people for days on end. The power that could feed thousands. The power that could hang the stars and set planets in their orbits was revealed.

It lit him up. Like he burst into flames. Flames that burn but do not consume. It happened on the mountain called Tabor, five miles east of Nazareth and 12 miles west of the south end of the Sea of Galilee, at the juncture of the territories of Issachar, Zebulun, and Naphtali...and we can only wonder if this is the event that led to the biblical statement that the people of Zebulun and Naphtali have seen a great light.

A gift is given to three disciples who climb with Jesus to the mountaintop, as they become able to recognize him for who he is. His clothing, his body, his face radiate the light of God, and the surrounding rocks and sky shimmer with unearthly color. These disciples gaze upon his glory. And in his face...what do they see? They see the one he looks at, the one he honors, the one he loves. The light flowing forth from him comes from the Father.

His very life is a never-ending prayer, and it is in his prayer that Jesus gazes on the Father. It is because his existence is unbroken prayer that the divine light surrounding him can become visible even to sleepy disciples.

They see in his face not only where he comes from...the Father's infinite depths...but also to the place where he is going. His face is set toward Jerusalem...and toward his apparent end as dust. There at Jerusalem, he will give up his blood and breath on the one part, but on the other he will free forever the children of God, you and me among them...so that the light shining from his face will illuminate the way for the rest of mankind.

And all this is shown to three awestruck disciples up there on the mountain as they gaze on him. They do not understand it, but they feel its glory and do not want to leave its presence...so it is openly suggested that they all hang out there for a while...and continue to marvel in it while they try to figure it out.

His face of light is set toward Jerusalem...and toward God the Father. And they marvel in it.

No different is that of Moses. His soul is full, reflecting the same direction and encounter.

In a sense, the disciples, up to this point, had the knowledge that there was something very different about their Master. They had many of those “ah ha” moments before with Jesus, out on the road. But today was the day that the veil was lifted from their eyes and they beheld the glory of God, the glory that was no longer hidden. For however long this moment lasted, the Son of God was no longer hidden in, with, and under Jesus of Nazareth, but his true identity was there for his disciples to see. And they were also able to hear the voice of God, giving shape and meaning to this strange and heavenly event/person their eyes were seeing. “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to Him.”

In these readings, we also find that Moses was finally able to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, through the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. The Israelites had also believed that Elijah would return before the final judgment to restore Israel so that she would be ready for the Messiah, which is why the people kept asking John the Baptist and then Jesus if they were Elijah.

Now, after God has announced, once again, who Jesus is, the cloud lifts and both Moses and Elijah have disappeared – or, we might say, they have entered into Christ and found their fulfillment in Him, just as the Law and the Prophets find their fulfillment in Him.

We, too, might think that our own fulfillment is to be found in ourselves, in the actualization of our own hopes and dreams...but that way is the way back to ashes. In our baptism we were joined to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and so our fulfillment can only come through Him, through obedience to Him and through faith in Him.

In preparing for this sermon, I was left to wonder to what extent each of us might have a similar power...to reflect out toward others, as well as to discern as viewers that reflection from others. For example, when we are physically ill, we are often described by others as not having our natural color, but rather looking more “ashen”...there is that ashes reference again. Seeing...and projecting..the side of our earthly life that is so temporary, but also the most evident..the one which we more readily identify with.

But then, “our color is back”. Suggesting aloud the significant difference that one can project, and others can perceive, when we can actually, physically note a personal restoration. When the body has healed enough to allow the soul to shine forth, so that the person you have known is again most present....the person who resides within, and will continue on when the body becomes ashes again.

We all project...most often seen in our faces. Think of how many are the faces that surround us!

The porcelain perfection of the fashion model, beautiful yet cold. The resigned expression of the disaster victim, eyes heavy with despair. We are surrounded by these faces, and a thousand others. We see them in shopping malls, on television, at the dinner table. Both faces alien to us, and intimate, but it is through our faces that we recognize each other. Some are masks, others are invitations...but our faces tell the truth and reveal who we are to those with eyes to see.

Our faces reveal what we look at, what we honor, what we desire....increasingly so with the passage of time. It is said that for our first fifty years, we wear the face that nature gave us, but from then on our face is our responsibility; being the sum total of our choices, our defeats, our victories, and what it is we love. Spend time with sinful passions...look on another race with hatred...fail to recognize that everything is holy, and your face will show it. See the beauty that surrounds you...know that God's children come in different colors....fulfill your desire for intimacy in sacred ways, and your face will show it.

So, it is with thanksgiving to God, that we are blessed with so many faces among us here...radiating God's grace and presence and mercy...uplifted beyond the ashes to praise the God who shines through Jesus, known to us as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.