

Last Epiphany – C  
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When our now 6 foot tall son was very young, we frequently took him cross country skiing in the Cascade Mountains near to where we lived in Washington State. On the way to the Nordic skiing area, we would drive by a popular downhill ski area. From the time that he was four years old, every time we passed the downhill area, where you could see skiers from the highway, he would point out the window at the skiers zooming down the big mountain and cry out “I want to do that.” For many years, we drove past the downhill area and carried on with our plans for a wilderness experience of the snow, until our son reached Middle School and off to snowboarding he went.

Mountains are enticing. They are thrilling to experience at almost any time of year; I love to hike and ski in the mountains. The wilderness encountered in Nordic skiing is a place to meet God. The quiet of snow-laden woods cannot be matched. And even in Michigan, while what passes for mountains in this area is a bit of a stretch, the beauty of the woods and the views from the hills are as godly as anywhere I have been. Having just returned from a few days of glorious Nordic skiing in the hills and woods of northern Michigan, I feel especially in harmony with today’s gospel reading.

In the story from Luke that we heard this morning, Jesus goes to the mountain with Peter, James and John. The purpose of this mountain trek is to pray, something that is very easy to do in the mountains. The story of the transfiguration, which this story is called, falls on the heels of a long series of healing stories. It would appear that Jesus needs to rest and reconnect with God through prayer. Going away somewhere to pray is quite different from going somewhere to get away from the pressures of daily life. Vacations are important, a much needed break from our regular routines. Getting away from it all is legitimate. However, going away to pray is another matter altogether. Going away to pray involves engagement with God. Sometimes retreat time is a time to refill our souls through extended uninterrupted time with God. Retreats can be restful. Sometimes a retreat can be very demanding; an experience of extreme spirituality, if you will. Let me explain.

In the spring of my final year of seminary in 1984, I found myself in a terrible dilemma. While all of my friends were happily planning their ordinations and lining up their first calls to various churches, I was spiritually stuck. I had passed my General Ordination exams, a brutal week long examination process. I had the final approval from the Diocesan Standing Committee. On paper, I was ready to go; on the inside, I was not. From 1979 to 1984, I had devoted a good portion of my life to preparing for ordination to the priesthood. Now at this crucial point, I knew I had to postpone my plans. Instead of planning my ordination, I decided to take a year off and enroll in a yearlong hospital chaplaincy-training program. That year was a good year but also a difficult year because at the end of it, I still had not reached any sort of definitive conclusion. Something drastic was necessary if I was ever going to move out of this terrible place of fear and uncertainty. I decided to do an eight-day silent retreat at a local Jesuit retreat house. Now I have to tell you, this kind of retreat is not for the faint hearted. Not only are you to be silent for eight days, you cannot read. You are given one short passage of scripture each day; you spend an hour each day with a spiritual director and attend intermittent church services, but there is absolutely no conversation among retreatants. It was just God and me. I thought I would die. The good news was there were some grounds to walk on. The bad news was that there were not enough

miles on those grounds to settle my restless spirit. I sat in silence for such long periods of time that I got headaches, something which I almost never get. There were about twenty participants on the retreat; we ate together in complete silence, sat in the chapel together, saw each other on the grounds, but never did we speak. This was an experience of extreme spirituality. But I met God on this retreat in more profound ways than I had ever experienced. By the end of the week I was calm and centered and when I got home I called my bishop and said: "I am ready".

Prayer is the only way to deal with major pieces of discernment such as this. Eight day silent retreats are not necessarily the best approach unless one is in spiritual turmoil. But prayer is essential when dealing with any kind of major life change.

When Peter, James and John accompany Jesus to the mountaintop they too go through a profound change. Prior to this time, the disciples were drawn to Jesus. They knew there was something compelling about him, they had witnessed him doing many remarkable healings, but the idea of Jesus as the messiah had never crossed their minds. What happens to Peter, James and John on the mountain is that they finally understand who Jesus really is. On the mountain and in prayer, the disciples have their eyes opened. Their time on the mountain is for them a stunning moment of revelation. The veil is pulled back and they see the glory of Jesus as the Messiah.

Those of us who are dedicated to the ongoing, and I might say never ending, development of our spiritual lives will from time to time have such moments of spiritual clarity. Mountaintop experiences come in varied forms as we grow and move in our spiritual lives. Sometimes we will have a spiritual high which is far more intoxicating than any form of chemical high could ever be. People who attend Cursillo weekends often describe their experiences as mountaintop experiences because of all of the loving surprises, an essential component of a Cursillo weekend. Often people will have a mountaintop experience within a normal Sunday service, either being touched by a piece of music, something said in a sermon or even something as simple as watching the children. There are the "aha" moments when suddenly something makes perfect sense and we are able to move forward with a new idea or a new plan in our lives. Then there are the times when we simply quiet ourselves and God speaks, not necessarily literally but in the sense of knowing that so often accompanies prayerful discernment.

These moments of spiritual clarity are sometimes described as *kairos* moments. From a Biblical perspective time moves in two different ways. The first way is that of marking time, *chronos*. This is the way of observing time with which all of us are familiar, the ticking of the clock, the passing of each calendar day. *Kairos* is a very different way of describing time. *Kairos* is more like the switch on the wall in a dark room you've never before entered. You do not know for sure the room is even there until you turn the light on. The fullness of time, the special moment of God's visitation, the Biblical writer calls it: when the time is right.

The story of the transfiguration is the *kairos* moment when Jesus' revelation moves into another mode altogether. The season of Epiphany has been about the light going on, the unfolding of the story of Jesus' ministry from the stable, through miracles of turning water into wine and a whole host of healings. The height of this Epiphany experience is the realization of and acceptance of Jesus as our savior, through the story of Peter, James and John and their experience of hearing God cry out to them: "This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him." As we move in our church year, in our liturgical calendar to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, let us take this story to heart, fold it into our souls and walk with God in grace and love.