

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany **February 14, 2021**

Said Mass

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

1 Kings 19:9–18; Psalm 27:5–11; Mark 9:1–9

Many of you know Sister Monica Clare of the Community of Saint John Baptist. She now lives at the sisters' convent in Mendham, New Jersey. But, for many years she served and lived here at Saint Mary's, and she is still a great friend of the parish. Sister Monica is a master of the social-media post, and this week a wonderful photo appeared on her Instagram feed. In the photo, she is standing in profile right down there, at the crossing, all by herself, rather dwarfed by the great height of the walls and windows of the nave. It is Ash Wednesday. She holds a small pot of ashes in her hand. She is waiting for someone to arrive, so she can make the Sign of the Cross on her forehead and say, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

Like any good photograph, this one refuses to tell you what Sister Monica is thinking. You have to wonder and guess. As I looked at it—perhaps because this year we'll have an Ash Wednesday without any ashes, it occurred to me, "It's *not* about the ashes. It's about the person she's waiting for, the person who's come here

because he wants to deal, whether he knows it or not, with some of life's hard, cold facts: mortality and temptation, sin and death, which is to say all of us, all of us who recognize ourselves in Saint Paul's famous words, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:18–21, 24–25)

I can't help hearing the truth of those words: sometimes it's just *hard* to be human. Sometimes we mess up. Sometimes we get lost, and we can't find the way out, no matter how hard we try. But Paul believes that there is an answer. He writes, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set me free from the law of sin and death.*"

So, maybe, in that photo, we see Sister Monica waiting for one of those Ash Wednesday encounters when she is going to help a stranger to acknowledge both his weakness *and* his belief that God is a hope, and a very present help in trouble (Ps 47). It is the kind of moment about which Jeremiah writes, "My wayward children," says the LORD, "come back to me, and I will

heal your wayward hearts.” “Yes, we’re coming,” the people reply, “for you are the LORD our God” (3:22). Ash Wednesday is a solemn day, but it is a joyous one, too. As I looked at that photo, I thought, “Apparently, there is fire in those ashes.”

But what *is* the source of the fire that animates repentance and return during Lent? Where does it come from? This morning’s gospel tells us. The Transfiguration on the holy mountain is of great importance in Mark. It comes almost exactly halfway through his gospel. Peter has just confessed that Jesus is the Christ, but he has been rebuked for his failure to understand the deeper meaning of that confession. Jesus has taught the disciples, and the crowd, that the life-giving decision to follow him often brings loss. And after this bit of good news that sounds like bad news, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John “up a high mountain.” In the Bible, important things happen on mountains. Horeb and Sinai are mountains where God reveals God’s self to Moses, to Israel, to Elijah. The mountain of Transfiguration will also be a place of revelation, and it’s not by chance that Moses and Elijah are part of the vision.

So, Jesus takes these three disciples with him, not because they are his favorites, I think, but because they represent *all* the disciples, including us. Disciples are

exceedingly imperfect in the gospel of Mark, but Jesus doesn't care. He takes them to a "place apart," to a holy place; and then, suddenly, "Jesus [is] transfigured before them." The Greek tells us that this is a metamorphosis. Jesus' familiar form is altered. Like a fragrant flower that blooms overnight or a brilliant butterfly emerging from its cocoon, Jesus is still Jesus, but his *morphōsis*, his form, is different. The form revealed on the mountain tells the whole story. The fullness of Jesus' identity is revealed, and a deep truth is told, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him."

And this voice is the voice of God, the Holy One, the source of life, the source of every blessing. And, in the Bible, when God's voice is heard in this way, a metamorphosis of everyday *reality* occurs. It is a kind of rupture that asks us to stop and consider what it means for God, who is *beyond* creation, and who *sustains* everything that exists, to be present, as if *in* creation, asking us to listen, to hear, to follow, and to be transfigured.

Halfway through his gospel, Saint Mark pauses to tell us the story of the Transfiguration on the Holy Mountain, which itself is a kind of pause. Like the Sabbath which ends the week but also prepares for the week to come, the Transfiguration tells us where we've been and prepares us for what is to come. It is a

moment of truth-telling and revelation. No wonder those three disciples wanted to linger up there on that mountain. Who could blame them?

But of course, they cannot and do not linger. The clock starts ticking again. The world starts to look familiar. Jesus leads them back down to the everyday world of urgent needs and unmanageable difficulties. His face returns to its usual, perhaps less challenging, form. Things go back to normal and life goes on. Still, we've been given a glimpse of a vision that cannot be taken away.

At this moment in our lives, we know all about urgent needs and intractable difficulties: pandemic, illness, the dying and the dead, vaccines or the lack thereof, unemployment, paying the rent, troubled businesses, a troubled city, a polarized nation, and an angry people, the marginalized and vulnerable made more vulnerable. That's our world just now, and it means that there is a lot to do. And there are so many people—including preachers like me—telling you how much you need to *do*—wear your masks; get the vaccine; help those in need; be a good citizen, a good disciple; work to end racism; manage your feelings, temptations, and passions; do your part to save the planet; support your political party; pay your taxes, make a donation. And, yes, figuring those things out is part of being a disciple.

But we are more than just our to-do list. None of that hard work or those good deeds will save us. They will not make Jesus love us, because he already does. They will not earn us an invitation to the best seats on the holy mountain. We are flawed and fallible, but, still, God invites us to share the vision. So, on Wednesday, this Ash Wednesday without ashes, hold on to that vision. Don't let it go. You don't have to feel ashamed. You don't have to run away from God. If you can, try to ascend the holy mountain, and, with the prophet, say, "Yes, I am returning. I am coming to you, for you are the Lord my God."

Copyright © 2021 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York. All rights reserved.