

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2020

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One year in Vacation Bible School, many years ago, my upper grade students made a large relief map of the Holy Land. We always developed our own curriculum for the school, and in this particular year it had the title “Where it Happened in Bible Times.” For our map we used an old ping-pong table, bought some chicken wire and had lots of donated newspaper, wallpaper paste and paint. We modeled everything in the Holy Land from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea, right up the Jordan Valley to the Sea of Galilee, put in Jerusalem and other principal places, and, of course, all the mountains: Tabor, Hermon, Carmel to name a few. The school lasted two weeks and each day the children referred to the model they were making while doing their lessons.

In the Bible, much happens in the mountains. The three-year ministry of Our Lord Jesus was no exception. He was tempted by Satan on a mountain; much of His important teaching was presented in the Sermon on the Mount; the Transfiguration took place on a mountain, He was crucified on another mount, and ascended into Heaven from Mount Olivet. My Bible School students are now over fifty years old. But they could take you to their map and show you the mountains all over Palestine and tell you a significant amount of the story of Our Lord’s life, death, and resurrection, just by referring to the map they had made.

The Blessed Lord used mountains much the same way we do: a getaway place, for rest and refreshment. Climbing them requires effort. Even Mount Monadnock or the local Blue Hill can leave you out of breath and deter the half-hearted climber. But the reward is barren beauty, clean air, and an unobstructed view for miles. So it is easy to recognize that mountains have always been places where souls may have a decisive encounter with Almighty God. On a mountain we feel we can see a bit more as God sees.

Along with the adventure and beauty is the risk of unexpected results. Mountains can have sheer drop-offs and no guard rails. There are many places where you can lose your footing. Mountains often create their own weather, which can change suddenly. That is what happened on the mount of Transfiguration. When clouds close in and the temperature drops and the wind picks up, it is easy to become afraid, lose your bearings, and get lost. So with the promise of great views goes the

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risk of discomfort. That too is very much like our encounter with the Living God. The whole weight of Scripture and the witness of the saints is when human beings stray into God's territory they may get more than they bargained for!

Incredible as it seems after 2000 years, something of the excitement, wonder, and fear, in Peter, James, and John, is still found in the account of the Transfiguration. These three men are the sources of the gospel passage we heard today. On the mountain they had a glimpse of the Glory of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Communion of Saints. Unlike us, they did not have the *Catechism* to give definitions and explanations of those terms.

The three disciples witnessed the turning of Christ towards the Cross. We know that because we know what happened later. But there are hints of the Passion in what they observed. St Luke reminds us Jesus was talking to Moses and Elijah about what would take place. Jesus had gone up a mountain many times to pray. But *this* time He called on the saints to come to His aid and comfort. Moses and Elijah appeared to comfort and strengthen Jesus for His coming Passion. St Matthew's account recalls Our Lord telling the disciples not to mention what they saw until after the Resurrection. But Peter, James, and John had *never even heard of a resurrection*, much less the need for one!

Here then is the example for us. Sometimes our friends on earth do not seem very helpful with their assurance of prayers. The disciples fell asleep, as they did later in Gethsemane. But as our Lord did, we can still find assistance in the intercession of God's holy ones in Heaven. Saint Paul said that even unbelieving Jews were beloved of God "*for the fathers' sakes.*" (*Romans 11:28*). You and I belong to a rich fellowship of apostles, martyrs, virgins, and saints. Saint Paul calls these holy souls "*the fathers.*" And they look on us with intense interest and sympathy as we run the race which they have already won. You and I are beloved of God *for the fathers' sakes*. They are the elder children who dwell with us in the one family of our Heavenly Father.

At His Transfiguration Our Lord Himself was observed being encouraged by the very greatest heroes of the Old Covenant. And Jesus once told us in His Father's

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house are many resting places. The *Catechism* speaks of the three parts of the Father's realm: militant, expectant, and triumphant. But the differences are not spatial distances. In the Mass there is no distance between you and me and the One Perfect Sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus on Calvary. And the *Epistle to the Hebrews* proclaims "We *are* come unto the mount Zion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the spirits of the just men made perfect." (12:22f)

Peter, James, and John found themselves in the right place at the right time. Having strayed into God's territory, they got something unexpected. They saw their Master in His Divine glory. It is a glory never very far away at any time. The distance between sinfulness and holiness is a *moral* distance. But remember the mountain experience. It takes effort to get to the top. But if we go with the Lord, as did the three disciples, and make the effort, you and I will find the Divine glory above the range of our weakness. And with Peter, James, and John, we will never want to leave!