

Help Thou My Understanding
Last Sunday of Epiphany 2021
Rev. Doug Floyd

1 Kings 19:9–18, Psalm 27, 2 Peter 1:13–21, Mark 9:2–9

When my sister's oldest son was under five, she was trying to tell Him the story of Easter. She puzzled that she couldn't find children's books on the cross, so she tried to tell him the story without a picture book. At the point where Jesus goes to the cross and dies, my nephew ran screaming through the house, "Jesus died, Jesus died!" He couldn't hear the whole story, so all that he could hear was bad.

When Jesus tells the disciples that he must die, they cannot grasp it. His death does not fit with their understanding of the Christ, so Peter rebukes. Peter cannot hear the whole story and therefore he cannot grasp what Jesus is saying. Jesus ends up rebuking Peter and then turns to the crowd surrounding his disciples and says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it (Mark 8:34-35).

Peter and those alongside him would think that the cross was a sign of Roman oppression: a sign of defeat. Jesus will show them that the cross is actually the unveiling of the Glory of God and a sign of victory over the evil one. Whoever follows Jesus must take up the cross and follow on the road to glory.

Then Jesus leads Peter, James and John up a mountain. What happens next is both a mystery and a revelation. The only way to approach such a wonder is in worship. One moment, Jesus is walking with Peter, James and John and the next moment, the glory of uncreated light shines out from Jesus. In the midst of this moment of glory, Moses and Elijah are seen talking with Jesus. Where did they come from? Where did they go? What did they talk about?

Moses also climbed a mountain. In the wilderness, the Lord called Moses to lead His people out of slavery. Moses is sent into a battle with the evil powers of the land, with Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. The Lord who is the true ruler of Egypt and Canaan and all creation will speak and act through Moses to expose the empty power of Pharaoh. In due season, the Lord will lead Moses and the people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea and to the Holy Mountain.

Moses climbs Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord, and he tells all the people to prepare to meet with the Lord. For God is going to speak to all the Hebrews from the Holy Mountain. Smoke descended on the mountain. A trumpet sounded. The Lord spoke in thunder. The people saw flashes of lightning and heard the thunder sounding from the smoking mountain, and they were terrified. They trembled and begged Moses to speak to them alone and not to let God speak to them for fear they would die.

It is at this Holy Mountain that the Lord pledges Himself to His people and makes a covenant with Israel through Moses. The people in turn pledge themselves to the Lord and promise to obey His commands. They will be a holy nation, a priestly people raised by God for the blessing

of the nations. But the people fail. Again and again, they turn to the idols and way of life they learned in Egypt.

Moses never led the people into the Promised Land. He only saw it from afar. He never saw them become the priestly people of the covenant. He feared that they would be unfaithful. He died following the call of God without having seen the promise of God fulfilled. Moses's story is incomplete without Jesus. When Jesus comes, he will fulfill this covenant.

Elijah also climbed a mountain. Elijah appears long after the Israel has had a civil war and split into a Northern and a Southern kingdom (Israel and Judah). The king and queen of Israel worship the false and perverse Baal and the people follow suit. Elijah appears with fire in his bones and on his lips. He confronts the rulers, he confronts the people, he confronts the Baal with fire from heaven, Elijah exposes the Baal as a false god and has the prophets of Baal killed even as He calls the nation to return to the Lord.

In spite of this dramatic victory, Elijah comes to realize that the king and queen will not turn to the Lord. The people alongside the king and queen will continue to follow in this corrupt and perverse worship. He travels hundreds of miles to the Holy Mountain and meets with the Lord. Yes, he hears the thunder. And yes, he sees the fire. But the Lord does not speak to him in the wind and fury and fire.

The Lord speaks to him in a still small voice. The Lord prepares him for the future even as Elijah will prepare a remnant for the destruction of Israel. Eventually, the land will be invaded and the nation dispersed. But through the ministry of Elijah and Elisha seeds will be planted for future generations. Even though Elijah and Elisha are faithful to God, their ministry will be incomplete.

Elijah's story waits for centuries upon the Lord. When Jesus comes, He will fulfill the prophecies.

In Jesus alone, the stories of Moses and Elijah will be made complete. Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets. In our story today, Moses and Elijah meet with Jesus. The Gospel does not tell us what they said. But Mark hints that they speak of the coming suffering of the Savior. Because the disciples will discuss the coming of Elijah and the suffering of the Christ on the way down the mountain.

The disciples do not grasp the wonder of the moment. When the Lord appears with Moses and Elijah, Peter speaks without knowledge. The voice of the Heavenly Father resounds. "This is my beloved Son; listen to Him." We should still heed this instruction from our heavenly Father. Even as we behold the mystery of God unveiled in Jesus Christ, there is much we simply do not understand. We are called to worship and adore the Lord even in our ignorance. St. Anselm, prays, "Lord I believe, help me to understand." That might be our prayer as well.

As we read about Jesus and the disciples climbing the mountain and the uncreated light bursting forth from Jesus, we simply have no means to imagine let alone understand this event. All words fail. This may be the wisdom of icons. The icon of the Transfiguration does not attempt to be a

true visual representation of the event. Rather, the image of the icon calls us to pause and behold the mystery of God's uncreated glory bursting forth from the Son. We quiet our hearts before the Lord in holy awe. We wait. We wonder at Jesus Christ: Fully God and Fully Man. God has poured his divinity into humanity and we behold the love of God fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

We do not grow in this mystery based on more and more knowledge. We grow up in faith and holy awe and worship. If we believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, we also have ascended a mountain. We may not remember beholding the glory and yet, we believe. The Spirit of God has opened our heart to faith.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we have not come to Mt. Sinai but to "Mt Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:22-24)

We no longer wander through the world searching for meaning as a blind person stumbling in the dark. We behold the world from the place of revelation, from Mt. Zion, from the communion of saints. We are bound up with the story of Moses and Elijah and a host of other Old and New Testament saints. All our lives our bound together in one holy communion. It is from this communion of love rooted in Jesus Christ, we look back our at our lives. Just like Moses and Elijah, our stories are incomplete without Jesus.

It is from this communion of love rooted in Jesus Christ, we hear the command, "Take up your cross and follow me."

This does not mean that everything in our world and our lives makes sense. We often struggle and question, and even doubt. The problems in our own lives or in the world around us can at times seem overwhelming. But we remember, we cannot see the end of the story for it is all bound up in Christ. How many saints died, thinking they were a failure and today we tell there stories as images of victory.

I am think of a young woman named Chelsea Ellis in Buffalo, New York. She is 30 years old and a devout follower of Jesus Christ. Chelsea has done missionary work in 13 countries around the world. She has a Master Degree in English as a Second Language, and taught at the local schools. Chelsea had a particular passion for refugees. One day last April, Chelsea walked to the Post Office to mail a cell phone to a refugee. As she was walking back, a Police SUV responding to a 911 call accidentally hit a parked call and lost control. The SUV struck Chelsea, and she suffered catastrophic injuries. She is now a quadriplegic and has been on a ventilator for the last April. She works hard every day with the hopes that one day she will no longer be on a ventilator.

How can we understand Chelsea's story? We believe in you Lord, help Thou our understanding. This prayer is not asking that we will understand our suffering. It is asking that we will understand our Lord. When the disciples fail to understand the call to the cross, Jesus leads them

up the mountain. What they behold is not an answer to the puzzle of the cross, what they behold is the glory of God manifest in Jesus. The Holy Spirit will bring these memories back to the Apostles as a way of helping to understand: that is to grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

Chelsea's story is bound up with the story of Christ Jesus. She may never have an answer in this life for the anguish of this suffering, but she clings to the Lord in worship and prayer. Family and friends surround her with encouragement and people all across the nation are helping to pay for her rising healthcare costs. There are over 3000 people praying for Chelsea regularly.

Chelsea's life, my life, your lives are all made complete in Christ and through His holy communion of saints and angels that surround us even now. When we look at our lives, when we face those moments of crisis and struggle and anguish, we honestly acknowledge our place of desperation and pain. We pray with Anselm. I believe help me to understand. We may never understand our own suffering and our own story. So we seek to understand Christ. We seek to behold Him in His glory. We seek to worship Him in Spirit and truth.

Might we pray with St. Anselm,

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love You. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' [Isa. 7: 9].¹

¹ St. Anselm. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works* (Oxford World's Classics) (p. 87). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.