

Second Sunday of Lent Year C, 2025

Gen 15:5-12, 17-18 Phil 3:17-4:1
Ps 27 Lk 9:28b-36

Heavy with sleep, fully awake: the Transfiguration

The gospel for the second Sunday of Lent is always that of the Transfiguration of the Lord Jesus, who, for a moment, in prayer on the mountain, in the presence of Peter, James, and John, reveals the glory that is his with the Father before the world began (Jn 17:5). While Jesus was at prayer, his face changed in appearance, the gospel of Luke recounts. Matthew's gospel states that "his face shone like the sun" (17:2). The breakthrough of divine glory affected not only Jesus's body, but even his clothing, which became "dazzling white" or "white as light" as Matthew's gospel relates.

The manifestation of divine glory happens while Jesus is at prayer. And while Jesus is at prayer, what are his chosen disciples doing? They are "overcome by sleep," literally translated, they are "heavy with sleep." Can we call to mind another time in the gospel when the same three disciples, Peter, James, and John, are with Jesus, who is at prayer, and they are sleeping? The agony in the garden of Gethsemane, right before Jesus is arrested and sentenced to be crucified.

And so there is a connection between the Transfiguration and the Passion, a connection that Luke's gospel makes explicit: Moses and Elijah appear alongside the transfigured Jesus and speak with him about what "he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem," "his

exodus,” which is a figurative way of referring to his death. Remembering Jesus’s glory in his transfiguration would later help the disciples understand the mystery of salvation and who Jesus is, the Son of the Father. This is why in the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus charges Peter, James, and John to tell no one of what they had seen, *until after his resurrection from the dead*. The glory of the Transfiguration, then, is also connected to the glory of the Resurrection.

Now we understand better why, on the second Sunday of Lent, the gospel of the Transfiguration is always read. Hearing this passage, we become like Peter, James, and John, privileged to behold in wonder the glory of the triune God, revealed through the voice of the Father, the transfigured body of the Son, and the cloud that symbolizes the Holy Spirit. The Transfiguration strengthens us for what lies ahead – the “exodus” of the Lord Jesus from our world in his death – and prepares us to await in hope the glory that is to be revealed through his resurrection, when he returns to our world, the one who was slain, but is now alive with a life that no longer belongs to this world, in the power of a life that will have no end.

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But let’s go back for a moment and consider the expression that Luke uses to describes the three apostles who were there to witness the Transfiguration. While Jesus was in prayer, they were “overcome by sleep” – or “heavy with sleep” – but then became fully awake.

Jesus had taken them with him up the mountain precisely in order to pray. Jesus wanted to pray, and he wanted Peter, James, and John to be with him while he prayed. He wanted them to pray alongside him while he prayed, so that all of them would be together, praying. Despite this unique invitation, to be alone with the Master, chosen to accompany him to the mountain – the place of prayer, *par excellence* – the three chosen apostles were heavy with sleep. Yes, they were overcome. Sleep defeated them, we can say, and nearly robbed them of the experience of witnessing the divine glory made manifest in the Transfiguration.

Last Sunday we reflected on the spiritual discipline of fasting, self-denial, and we considered that ancient wisdom summed up in four short words: *empty belly, full heart*.

Today, we can consider prayer under the guidance of another four short words: *empty mind, full awareness*. And by awareness, I mean, of course, awareness of God, of the divine presence. This is what we want as Christians, as spiritual people, to be always and everywhere aware that God is here, in our midst, manifesting his goodness, and truth, and beauty. This is a special and great grace desired by those for whom the words of today's psalm have real meaning and resonance: "*Of you, O LORD, my heart speaks; you my glance seeks. Your presence, O LORD, I seek. Hide not your face from me.*" The psalm expresses the great human desire to know God, to see God, to be in the divine presence, aware and in wonder of who God is, of the One in whose company we are privileged to be.

And such awareness both lead to and comes from prayer. But unless our minds are emptied in and through prayer, awareness of God remains elusive, partial, fleeting. What do I mean by having an empty mind? I mean following the example of the Lord Jesus, who retreated from the noise of the world, the concerns of his ministry, the needs of the people in order to be alone with the Father. The isolation of the mountain was the place he chose to do this.

It takes an effort to climb the mountain, but the effort is worth it. Once we are upon the heights, the noise and busyness and fretting of the world is left behind. On the mountain, in its silence and seclusion, the mind can rest and for a time enjoy the near absence of worried thought, concerned thought, anxious thought, the thought of things that need to be done, taken care of, tended to, the thought of things that are, but shouldn't be, the thought of what is wrong, of what must be set right, and all whole the parade of unending thoughts the mind can think.

But once the mind turns away from being "*occupied with earthly things,*" as St Paul says in our second reading (Phil 3:19), new thoughts begin to fill the mind: thoughts of peace and truth, of light and joy, thoughts of holiness and redemption, thoughts of gladness and generosity and grace. When the mind is emptied of fretful thought and "*earthly things,*" we can then become aware of God's presence, God's glory, which is all around us. Empty mind, full awareness. This is the promise of prayer.

But if we never give the mind a rest, then we will become sleepy. “Overcome by sleep” in such a way, we miss being aware of and present to the divine glory that surrounds us.

It might seem strange to suggest that resting the mind will lead to our being more awake and more aware, when it is a common experience that when we rest our minds, empty them, we become, almost at once, unbearably sleepy. But this is not surprising at all.

If you’ve ever been on a retreat, then you know that the first day or two or even three, when you first withdraw to the figurative heights of the mountain, when you have that first experience of silence and seclusion, you find yourself very sleepy. The mind has been so active and full of “earthly things,” that when it is finally given a chance to be empty, sleep comes upon it with heavy insistence. A good retreat will take into account the need for such rest precisely to invite and allow this sleepiness overcome the mind, at least for a day or two, so that afterwards real prayer can follow.

Perhaps, though, you’ve had a similar experience when on vacation. And by vacation, I don’t mean a sight-seeing trip, where every day has planned excursions and outings so that you can see and do all there is to see and do. I mean a true and proper vacation, where, away from home, your time is vacant and nothing is planned, where you can vacate your mind of its worries and everyday concerns. In week-long vacation such as this, it is not uncommon for the first day

or two to be marked by sleep and sleepiness, even by naps during the day followed by easy and deep sleep at night.

But once the mind is emptied, rested, whether on retreat or on vacation, then the “magic” happens. You have so little on your mind that you begin to enjoy simple, ordinary things. You start to notice, in wonder and delight, things you would have failed to notice before. The sound of the wind in the trees. The playfulness of birdsong. The rich and damp smell of the soil beneath your feet. The fiercely bright colors of the flowers of some little plant that if it were growing in your lawn, you’d rip out by the roots, calling it a weed. But now, for the first time, it seems, you notice these things, and they are alive to you, and you are aware of them... and they are good. From the empty mind, a mind at rest, comes full awareness...

And only now am I really ready for prayer. Now prayer brings new insights, new meanings. Now prayer pierces deep within and strikes the rock from which living water begins to flow. Now I see. Now I understand. Now I feel. Now I am truly alive to all that is and to the goodness and glory of the God who beckons me to be in his presence and to know him, himself wanting this even more than I could ever want or express, however sincere my prayer may be, even when with the psalmist I pray: *Your presence, O LORD, I seek. Hide not your face from me.*

Maybe something similar was happening with Peter, John, and James. Alone with Jesus, they could not really pray because their

minds had not been not emptied of all their questions, concerns, fears, and worries. But the silence and seclusion of the mountain brought on a sleep that overcame them, and when, rested, they finally shrugged off the heaviness of sleep and became fully awake, they were in amazement to be in the presence of God's glory, a glory that had always been there – for where Jesus is, there is the divine glory – but to which their minds and perception had been dulled by “earthly things” and concerns. At last, they were awake, and aware!

But they could hardly take in what they were seeing, experiencing. And though Peter “*did not know what he was saying,*” words did not exactly fail him. As expressed in the psalm, “*Of you my heart speaks,*” Peter, with his mouth, and from the fullness of his heart (Lk 6:45), spoke words of truth: “*Master, it is good that we are here.*”

Empty mind, full awareness. Every day, but especially during Lent, we need to find the silence and seclusion of “the mountain,” so that our minds can be emptied, and made empty, be ready to be filled with the awareness of God's nearness and goodness. Reaching the mountain might take some doing – getting away, shutting off the television and radio, turning off the cell phone – and once there, the heaviness of sleep will bear down upon us. But then, once rested, we will become fully awake to God and to his glory. And then we, too, will say, from the fullness of our hearts: *O Lord, it is good, very good, that we are here, with you. O Lord, make us turn to you. Let us see your face, and we shall be saved (Ps 80:3).*