

The account of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop is always read on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. The six days later refers to Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. The dramatic event, Jesus' clothes turning dazzling white, being joined by Moses and Elijah, and a voice from the heavens saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" further cements in the disciples' minds the extraordinariness of Jesus; and in many ways confirms what Peter declared less than a week earlier, "You are the messiah, the Christ."

Peter's desire to stay on the mountain, build booths for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, has often been thought to reflect yet another instance when Peter just about gets it, only to miss the mark. But I'm not sure. Maybe Peter, sensing the holiness of this moment, simply wants to bask in it for a bit. No matter, Jesus quickly calls these three disciples to descend the mountain. There is more that must take place.

While Jesus is transfigured, I think the disciples are transformed. In letting go of their fear they are able to summon the courage to once more follow Jesus; to come down off the mountain and continue living out their lives of discipleship. Their mountaintop experience has left them forever changed, in a good way.

We have reached the mountaintop of the season of the Sundays after the Epiphany. We have experienced a number of revelations concerning Jesus' identity as Son of God, Prince of Peace, Messiah and Christ. Jesus has gathered, inspired, and taught us the ways of the Kingdom of God. He has called on us to love God with all our hearts, and to love our neighbors as fully and unconditionally as God loves us. Like the disciples, we have followed Jesus, navigated discipleship, and we, too, have been changed by the experience.

At the risk of rushing us down the mountain, it's time for us to begin the hard work of Lent. Unlike the season of Epiphany which revealed much about the identity of Jesus, Lent is a season that will teach us much about ourselves.

It will take courage to fully live into Lent, but just as Jesus told the disciples, "Do not be afraid," knowing the very difficult journey to the cross they were going to make, we, too, can find the courage to face our own journey with intentionally and faithfully keep Lent, in preparation for receiving the hope and promise that comes with the miracle of Easter.

Every experience we have, either good, bad, or indifferent, will change us in some way. That is a fact of life. The experience of Lent has the potential to change us in powerful ways, because it will, if we let it, strengthen our relationship with God.

So, here is an invitation to experience Lent in a new way this year, through the lens of Ash Wednesday and the Litany of Penitence. Penitence is hard work, it is gut work, because through it we have to name, honestly and before God, all the ways we have broken God's heart. It is the work of naming those things we have done, and those things we have failed to do, that grieve God deeply, because God knows that is not reflective of who God created us to be. It is the work of taking an honest look at the ways we sin. But the promise of doing this hard work is that it enables us to then turn back toward God. We are forgiven. We can begin again. We are changed.

On Ash Wednesday we will pray the Litany of Penitence. In twelve petitions we will name the “categories” of our sins, those things done and left undone, that break the bonds of relationship with God. I say categories because they are short on specifics, unless we have the courage, and take the time, to fill them in with the details of our own brokenness. And it happens fast. There is not enough time to truly think about, let alone name, our sin.

For example, here’s the first one. “We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have not forgiven others, as we have been forgiven.” Of course, this is true. But exactly how is it true? Answering that question is beginning the hard, but critical, work of repentance. It takes time, strength, and courage. And as we journey toward Easter doing this work can’t help but change us.

You might have noticed a little leaflet in your bulletin. I created it for each of us to use; a tool to prepare for Ash Wednesday and the work of Lent. I’m going to sit with in over the next few days; take time, pray, and then record some of my very own specifics. I invite you to do the same.

Then, as we gather together on Ash Wednesday and pray the Litany of Penitence, it won’t simply wash over it. Instead, praying together, it will begin to change us in ways we can never imagine – it is the Spirit’s work after all. And each Friday, I’ll pray it by myself, naming before God all the ways I fail to honor God’s love. This is the “coming down of the mountain work” we are called to.

Then, when we start that other climb, the one of Holy Week, and particularly Good Friday, I invite you to bring it with you. Fold it in half so no one can read it. Close it with a piece of tape. Lay it at the foot of the cross, turning all that brokenness over to Jesus, who bears all our sins. As we light the new fire at the Great Vigil of Easter watch it turn to smoke, an offering of our true selves to God.

Together, let us do the transformative work of Lent. It will change us, individually, and as a community, forever.