

Seeing Forever

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany, March 3, 2019

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About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" --not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. Luke 9:28-36

While traveling in Mexico last week, I was reminded of La Peña de Bernal, a massive stone monolith near the center of the country that is widely claimed to be among the largest in the world. La Peña rises nearly 1200 feet above the surrounding landscape. The altitude of the summit is more than 8200 feet. Many hikers who make it to the top on a clear day excitedly report that you can "*see forever.*"

Many of us here have probably been at least one place where we later said that we could *see forever*. We often mean more than the view. We experienced a sense of awe that transcends our normal perceptions. Our usual worries and ambitions recede. We can't explain why, but 'up there' we feel closer to the divine.

Recalling some of our own mountaintops may better prepare us to consider the story in today's gospel. Peter, James and John are invited by Jesus to go up a mountain to pray. There, "*The appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white ... [and] they saw his glory.*" I wonder if it could be said of Peter and James and John, up on the top of that mountain, that they could literally *see forever*. They were briefly privileged to look into the face of forever.

In our own hearing of this story, we also naturally imagine being invited up the mountain. We may wonder about times or ways that we caught glimpses of forever in Jesus. Or we may rightly wonder about the relationship between our 'normal' perceptions, our 'normal' human experiences and those occasional, fleeting incandescent moments.

In many ways, of course, we regularly look for a meeting place of the human and divine in the Eucharist. One instance is the custom of adding a small amount of water to the wine that is to be consecrated. Before or during the mingling of water and wine, the priest prays: "*In the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity.*"

One might say that the three apostles who were invited up the mountain briefly shared in the divinity of Christ, or they came close! And if so, we may sympathize with Peter's impulse to '*make three dwellings.*' He wants to capture the awe, to preserve it, to remain there ... *forever*. He wants to avoid a mountaintop hangover – that let-down of returning to normal routines and obligations after you've been on high, so to speak.

But one critical part of this story is only implied in today's text. Jesus *does* come down off of the mountain. The apostles follow him down. Jesus came down because he had already '*humbled himself to share our humanity.*' He came down '*to live and die as one of us*' (BCP p. 362), to make the journey to Jerusalem, and to his death. This is the journey that we will travel with him, and he with us, in the impending season of Lent and in Holy Week.

In conjunction with my earlier description of La Peña de Bernal, I didn't mention that I myself have never made it to the top there. I started the climb once, in 2005, but I was carrying our 18-month-old daughter Grace in a backpack. The path became too dangerous. Just last week, I looked into the possibility of trying again. I had to say no when I learned the cost of a driver for the day to get there from where we were staying.

My not yet making it to the top of La Peña may be what causes me to see in today's gospel that not all of the apostles are invited to the top. And in our lives it's the same. Sometimes the rest of us don't believe the trip is worth it. Some have good reasons for not getting there. Sometimes it seems as if Jesus invites others up to share in the divinity while we are left behind. "*Peter, James, John: please come on up the mountain. I hope the other nine of you will get the dishes done while we're gone.*" How are we to comprehend or make sense of our place in the up-or-down bigger scheme of things?

The complex places we humans live, between the human and divine, between death and life, between now and forever, were recently illustrated for me in John Green's 2012 novel *The Fault in Our Stars*.¹ I admit that I'd been resisting reading it or seeing the movie made from it. It was so crazily well-received in popular culture that I figured it must be awful and shallow. But on impulse I bought the book in the airport on the way to Mexico and I read a lot of it on that day last week that I did *not* go to La Peña. The novel's 17-year-old protagonist, Hazel Grace, has cancer and has been seeing a boy, Augustus, who also has cancer and who dies from it.

Hazel and Gus had met at a Wednesday night teen cancer support group in the basement of an Episcopal Church. The exact meeting place was a circle of chairs directly under what we call the 'crossing' in the church. The annoying group facilitator, himself a survivor is always saying: "*Here we are, meeting in the very Heart of Jesus.*" (p. 4) Hazel's response is sarcastic. But isn't that why, at our best, Christians have gathered for worship and shared the sacraments for 2000 years? "*Here we are, meeting in the very Heart of Jesus.*"

After Gus dies, Hazel offers a brief eulogy at his funeral. She ends by saying, "*Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me forever within [our] numbered days, and I'm grateful.*" (p. 260)

In that scene and in many others, characters live through hell. They live with fear and anger. They have to make impossible decisions. They suffer the worst losses that we humans can suffer. And yet many persevere in faith, hope and love. You could say that, even at the bottom of the mountain, or even if they won't ever be invited up to the top in this life, they manage to continue seeing forever.

I wonder if that's our invitation today: to take stock of all in our lives that is heart-breaking or daunting or crushing or inclines us to despair or cynicism – and even so to keep alive our own faith, hope and love, even so to persevere in seeing forever. *Amen.*

¹ *The Fault in Our Stars*, John Green, 2012, Penguin, 2012.