

There is something very beautifully balanced about reading from Isaiah chapters 8 and 9 today, as we begin to look towards the summit of Great Lent, the Sunday of the Cross. Having labored in prayer and fasting, and hopefully in concrete acts of mercy and compassion now for two full weeks, we stand as if just a distance from the summit of the mountain. We have not yet arrived, but we can see the peak. Having stood upon that mountain many times, we can hear the echoes—echoes of the particular liturgical celebration (the Sunday of the Cross) and echoes of another mountaintop experience, the Holy Transfiguration of our Lord.

The liturgical echoes are solemn and steady. The path to them is narrow—filled with prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. The path from them is even narrower—it is the very Christian life itself: If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me—and as the Holy Apostle Luke adds, “daily”. The ascetical struggle to the mountaintop of lent is given to us precisely to hear this message, and to send us forth from there, “resolutely facing Jerusalem”, walking with our Lord to his own crucifixion, for the life of the world—a crucifixion which doesn’t free us from having our own; rather, by it our Lord shows us how to endure it, and with whom.

The other mountaintop experience of which we might hear echoes on this Sunday’s commemoration is that of the Transfiguration. Peter and James and John, those closest to Christ, were invited to ascend the mountain with Christ in order to behold his glory, and in so doing, they were blessed to hear the words of the unseen Father: “This is my beloved son, listen to him!” This mountaintop experience, as wonderful as it was, was not a place to stay and dwell, despite Peter’s efforts to build tents for a longer sojourn. Rather, they, like we—or we, like they—must descend the mountain, and face the Cross of Christ for its own sake, and take up our own. This would be the content of “listen to Him.” Keep the commandments. Or, as the Mother of God said at the Wedding in Cana to her Son and our Lord, “whatever he tells you, do it.”

So, with these echoes in our minds, ringing through the caverns of our Lenten mountain ascent, we read from Isaiah 8 and 9:

The people who walked in darkness
Have seen a great light;
Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death,
Upon them a light has shined.

And

For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷ Of the increase of His government and peace There will be no end, Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, To order it and establish it with judgment and justice From that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

What a beautiful time to be reminded of the Nativity of Christ, as well as his Holy Theophany—“upon them a light shone”. It is a beautiful phrase actually, in Greek—“phos lampsei eph imas”. It almost says, “the light like a lamp shone on them” or “the lightbulb went off.” We now no longer walk in darkness, for Christ, the light has come.

So, walking in the thin air of the third week of the Great Fast, as evening falls near the peak of the mountain, let us recall that Christ the true light has shown forth into the world. We have beheld him. We hear him—do we listen? We know of the darkness of his coming crucifixion, but let’s not forget the blinding light of the radiant empty tomb.