

Good morning. Just a short while ago we celebrated the holy season of Christmas. And now, despite these few days of snow, there are signs the season is already changing. In a few weeks' time we will welcome spring.

Today marks the last Sunday in Epiphany; next week Lent begins, with a COVID-style Shrove Tuesday and somber Ash Wednesday. Soon enough, we'll be placing lilies on the altar for Easter Sunday.

Today also marks a feast day dating back to the time of early Christians - the feast of St. Valentine.

The most well-known story about St. Valentine refers to the imprisonment and execution of a pious Christian who ministered to believers during Roman Empire around 260 AD.

Persecution of the early church by the Roman Empire began a few years after the crucifixion of Christ and continued into the fourth century, when Christianity was finally recognized as a legal religion by Emperor Constantine.

According to early tradition, Saint Valentine had been arrested for his faith. While imprisoned he restored the sight of his jailer's blind daughter. Some stories indicate Valentine performed 'secret' weddings for Roman soldiers forced to take an oath of celibacy to maintain their status in the Roman army. Valentine was executed on February 14th.

Two centuries later, Pope Gelasius I proclaimed a feast day be celebrated in honor of St. Valentine. That day became associated with romantic love in the 14th and 15th centuries. And in 18th-century England it grew into an occasion in which couples expressed love by presenting flowers, offering confectionery, and sending greeting cards otherwise known as "valentines".

So tonight, along with giving flowers or candy and having that romantic dinner with your loved one, put up a toast to the legend of Saint Valentine, one of our early Christian martyrs.

In our gospel story today, Jesus takes three of the disciples onto the Mount of Transfiguration.

These three had been with him for over a year, witnessing many miracles and signs that there was something more to him than humanness could explain. They had seen him walk on water, calm the stormy sea with a word, feed the masses

and heal the blind. They witnessed his power over evil spirits and saw firsthand his ability to outwit the most learned Jewish scholars. Even so, their understanding of Jesus was limited; they did not completely grasp who He was.

In the chapters preceding our passage, Jesus had asked them, 'Who do you say that I am?' and though Peter answers correctly, the conversation that follows reveals his ignorance. For as Jesus explains he must be killed, then rise from the dead after three days, Peter pulls him aside, saying, 'Master, this cannot be so'.

Our Gospel story describes what happens only six days later, when Peter, James and John accompany Jesus to a remote mountain peak.

Now the transfiguration is a pivotal moment in the New Testament. In this one moment the divinity of Christ is clearly revealed. He is at once the humble son of a carpenter and the powerful Son of God.

Jesus tells Peter James and John not to speak of this moment until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. But the experience burns in the hearts of the disciples, and they ponder what it means among themselves.

Our Old Testament reading describes another divine experience, one between the prophet Elijah and his apprentice.

In today's scripture we follow the last hours of Elijah's ministry. He and Elisha are walking from Gilgal with the understanding that Elijah's life is nearing the end.

Now Elijah was a mighty prophet of God who, because of his calling had been in conflict with the kings and those in power in Israel throughout the course of his life. There were times he felt abandoned by God; times he fled for his life from the evil designs of human royalty.

But in today's scripture, Elijah is going home, and as Elisha tags along, Elijah seems to consider him extra baggage. Over the years Elisha has served his master, but he has not participated in the ministry. The prophet Elijah had done all the heavy lifting, speaking truth to power and handling the fallout from those confrontations.

And even though Elijah knows that Elisha will become God's prophet in his place, in today's passage it becomes obvious that Elijah is not convinced his servant is ready.

At points along the journey, Elijah dismisses him, telling him 'stay, for the Lord has sent me on to Bethel', a journey of about 6 miles.

At Bethel, a group of prophets draw alongside Elisha to warn him, “Do you know that today the Lord will take your master from you?” Elisha tells them, ‘Yes, I know; be silent.’

After they reach Bethel, Elijah warns him yet again to stay, saying “the Lord has sent me to Jericho”, another 5 miles. A Jericho, a second group of prophets tell Elisha, “today the Lord will take your master from you.” Again, he responds, ‘Yes, I know. Be silent.’

Finally, Elijah tells Elisha ‘the Lord has sent me to the Jordan River’. Elisha insists that he will go too.

When they reach the river, Elijah rolls up his cloak and strikes the water. The water parts. The two men cross over to the other side.

Convinced there is nothing he can do to deter Elisha’s presence, Elijah asks him, ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Give me a double portion of your spirit,’ Elisha answers. Elijah tells him he has asked a hard thing, but provides this caveat: ‘If God permits you to witness my departure, it shall be granted’.

And Elisha does see his master taken up into the clouds, as if in a chariot of fire.

Elisha carries on Elijah’s ministry and the next 12 chapters in 2nd Kings offer a fascinating description of how God uses the prophet Elisha and the miracles he performed.

Now there’s an important link between our old Testament story and the gospel reading. In both of these, human beings witness the power and the hope of God to conquer the grave.

As Elisha watched Elijah recede into the clouds, he recognized that his master would never see death. A group of prophets from Jericho helped him search the area for Elijah’s body – but not a trace of it could be found.

And that day on the mountain, Jesus’s countenance became dazzlingly white. Elijah and Moses appeared alongside, talking with him about events to come. When Peter, ignorant of Jesus’ rightful lineage, suggested they build tents to honor the three godly men, they are interrupted by a cloud suddenly

overshadowing the mountain peak. And they heard God's voice declare 'This is my Son, my beloved. Listen!'

This was not a hallucination. It was a divinely timed intervention. You see, Peter James and John witnessed the transfiguration as a critical moment that would impact the lives they would live and the deaths they would die after the resurrection.

Apostles, prophets and martyrs. Like Elijah and even St. Valentine, these common fishermen would be able to face death without fear. Because through the transfiguration, Christ cemented within them that surety of hope that extends beyond the grave.

Jesus said, "If any man believe in me, though he die, yet shall he live."

As we close the season of Epiphany, we reflect on the meaning of the transfiguration. As our psalmist wrote, "Out of Zion, perfect in beauty, God reveals himself in glory".

Epiphany is a season of light and hope; the revelation of God through Christ, reaching out to man.

Over the next few weeks we will experience the sobriety of Lent as we await the holy dawning of Easter morning. Let us give thanks for God's patience with humanity, and for His love that reaches out to all of us.

In Christ's name, amen.

(Sermon by Betty Palmer)