

Hear what the Spirit is saying

Sunday Morning at St. Hugh's in Idyllwild, California

February 23, 2020 | Last Sunday After Epiphany

Collect for The Last Sunday After Epiphany

O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments we may please you both in will and deed; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. ~BCP 216

Exodus 24:12-18 NRSV

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

2 Peter 1:16-21 NRSV

16 For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17 For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." 18 We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. 19 So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 20 First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Matthew 17:1-9 NRSV

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

Psalm 2 BCP 586

- 1 Why are the nations in an uproar? * Why do the peoples mutter empty threats?
- 2 Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt, and the princes plot together, * against the LORD and against his Anointed?
- 3 "Let us break their yoke," they say; * "let us cast off their bonds from us."
- 4 He whose throne is in heaven is laughing; * the Lord has them in derision.
- 5 Then he speaks to them in his wrath, * and his rage fills them with terror.
- 6 "I myself have set my king * upon my holy hill of Zion."
- 7 Let me announce the decree of the LORD: *
he said to me, "You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.
- 8 Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance *
and the ends of the earth for your possession.
- 9 You shall crush them with an iron rod * and shatter them like a piece of pottery."
- 10 And now, you kings, be wise; * be warned, you rulers of the earth.
- 11 Submit to the LORD with fear, * and with trembling bow before him;
- 12 Lest he be angry and you perish; * for his wrath is quickly kindled.
- 13 Happy are they all * who take refuge in him!

February 23, 2020 | Last Epiphany A
SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Matthew 17:4 NRSV



Is it good for us to be here?

By Debie Thomas, Director of Children and Family Ministries at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Palo Alto, CA.

It's Transfiguration Sunday — the apex of the liturgical season we call Epiphany. After weeks of hints and intimations — a star, a dove, a baptizer's voice in the wilderness — today we emerge into full sunlight, blinded as God parts the veil and shows us Christ's majesty.

All of the Synoptic Gospels tell the story of the Transfiguration, underscoring its importance to the early church, and over the centuries, the event has accumulated meanings — most of them abstractly theological. Growing up, I was taught that the Transfiguration is important because it reveals Jesus's divine nature, foreshadows his death, secures his place in the stream of Israel's salvific history, exalts him above the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), and prefigures his Resurrection.

Weighty and important stuff, no doubt. But here's my confession: I'm not sure I *like* the Transfiguration. I'm not sure it serves us well. Here's why:

For as long as I can remember, I've measured the depth and "success" of my faith by the number of mountaintop experiences I can truthfully claim. Have I "felt the Spirit" in Sunday morning

worship? Has Jesus “spoken” to me? Have I seen visions? Spoken in tongues? Encountered God’s living presence in my dreams?

Most of the time, the answer is “no.” Which means I’ve spent most of my life feeling like a spiritual failure. “Deep” and “mature” Christians (I’ve assumed), have frequent experiences akin to Peter’s on the mountaintop. They see visions and dream dreams. They have actual conversations with a God who speaks to them in audible English. Jesus reveals himself to them in spectacular ways they can’t describe or deny. *They* don’t have to squint and strain to discern God’s presence; God shows up in their living rooms in Technicolor glory, and blows their minds.

It’s not true, of course. This hierarchy of holiness. This way of measuring piety. And yet it lingers in me — this yearning for a particular kind of affective experience to come along on a regular basis, and validate my faith. The truth is, I like and want and crave and covet Christian mountaintops. And stories like the Transfiguration don’t help. If Peter could see Jesus in his full, unfiltered glory, why can’t I?

One of the *many* problems with my “God on the mountaintop” version of Christianity is that it prompts me to carve up and compartmentalize my life. To separate “sacred” from “secular.” The mountain from the valley. The spectacular from the mundane. As if God is somehow more present during a rousing worship set, a stirring sermon, or a silent retreat in a seaside monastery, than God is when I’m doing the laundry, returning a library book, or driving my son to his friend’s house. The work of discernment is harder and messier in everyday life, yes. I have to look for God minus blinding lights and roaring thunder. But that doesn’t mean it’s impossible. The God of the whisper is still God.

In its worst iteration, mountaintop Christianity is addictive, such that we spend our days pursuing a “high” we conflate with spiritual success. When we don’t experience that high, we feel empty, unloved, angry, or bored. Meanwhile, we don’t notice the ever-present God in whom we actually live and move and have our being. Desperate for the mountain, we miss the God of the valley, the conference room, the school yard, the grocery store, the street corner. Worshipping the extraordinary doesn’t make for a healthy faith.

In our Gospel reading this week, Peter responds to Jesus’s Transfiguration with an affirmation, immediately followed by a proposal: “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” “If you wish, I will make three dwellings.”

It is good for us to be here. Is it? Well, in some ways, yes. In some ways, Peter is absolutely right. It is good to set aside times and places for contemplation. It is good to gaze upon Jesus, whenever and however he reveals himself to us. It is good to move out of our comfort zones and confront the indescribable Otherness of the divine.

Until the Transfiguration happens, Peter and his fellow disciples experience Jesus as a teacher, a storyteller, a healer, and a traveling companion. His face, his manners, his voice, his mission — all are familiar to them. Familiar, endearing, and safe.

Then one day, high up on a mountain, the unimaginable happens. Before their very eyes, Jesus changes, becoming at once both fully himself and fully unrecognizable. The man they think they know is suddenly more, suddenly Other. And the path that lies ahead of him — a path that must end on another high place, a hill called Golgotha — upends everything the disciples think they understand about Jesus.

Whenever we think we have God figured out, it’s good to be reminded that we’re wrong. Whenever we try to stuff Jesus into a theological, cultural, or political box for our own convenience, it’s good to have that box blown open. Whenever we grow complacent, self-righteous, or lazy in our lives of

faith, it's good to be brought to our knees by a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are not our ways. There are very good reasons to encounter Jesus on the mountaintop.

On the other hand, it's *not* good to fixate on the sublime so much that we desecrate the mundane. Most of life is unspectacular. By which I mean, most of life doesn't dazzle us with non-stop special effects. But all of life — *all of life* — contains the sacred. The challenge is to cultivate the kind of sight that perceives God in places darker, murkier, and more obscure than a mountaintop.

As soon as Peter affirms his experience, he tries to hoard it. What I hear in his plan to “make dwellings” is an understandable but ultimately misguided attempt to contain, domesticate, protect, and possess the sublime. To harness the holy. To make the fleeting permanent. To keep Jesus shiny, beautiful, and safe up on a mountain. After all, everything is so good up there. So clear. So bright. So unmistakably spiritual. Why not stay forever?

Well, because God says no. Even before Peter is finished speaking, God covers him in a thick cloud, and tells him to listen to Jesus — NOT to his own misconceptions about the life of faith. It's *Jesus's way* — the way of the valley, the way of the cross, the way of humility, surrender, and sacrifice — that Peter must learn to follow.

In Matthew's version of the Transfiguration event, the disciples are overcome with fear when God speaks to them out of the cloud. They cower in silence, and fall to the ground. But then comes the part of the story I *do* like: “*Jesus came and touched them, saying, ‘Get up and do not be afraid.’ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.*”

Jesus comes and touches his friends, and in that simple, ordinary human encounter of skin on skin, the disciples catch their breath, shed their fear, and return to themselves. Finally, they see the divine in a guise they can bear. As it turns out, Peter, for all his eagerness and bluster, isn't made for unending Transfigurations. He can't handle too much of the spectacular. All he can *actually* take of God's glory is a tender human hand on his shoulder, and a reassuringly human voice in his ear.

Here's the thing: I still yearn for mountaintop experiences, and that's okay. They'll come and go according to God's will and timing, not according to my micromanagement. In that sense, sublime spiritual experiences are easy; they require little from me. I can't control them. What's hard is consenting to follow Jesus back down the mountain. What's challenging is learning to cultivate awe and wonder in the face of the mundane. What's essential is finding Jesus in the rhythms and routines of the everyday. In the loving touch of a friend. In the human voices that say, “Don't be afraid.” In the unspectacular business of discipleship, prayer, service, and solitude. In the unending challenge to love my neighbor as myself.

With Transfiguration Sunday, we come to the end of another liturgical season. Having seen the bright lights of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long darkness of Lent. We can't know ahead of time what mountains and valleys lie ahead. We can't predict how God will speak, and in what guise Jesus might appear. But we can trust in this: whether on the brightest mountain, or in the darkest valley, Jesus abides. Even as he blazes with holy light, his hand remains warm and solid on our shoulders. Even when we're on our knees in the wilderness, he whispers, “Do not be afraid.”

So listen to the ordinary. Keep listening. It is good for us to be here.

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JWJ Home Page: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/>

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