

Sermon for Last Epiphany C  
Sunday, February 27, 2022  
“From the Mountaintop”

Text: Luke 9:26-43a

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is something magnificent about mountaintops. Mountaintops are majestic and awe-inspiring when viewed from afar, especially the really tall, snow-capped kinds. Mountaintops are challenging to climb and can push a climber to his or her limits of strength, emotion, mental stamina, and endurance. But, reaching the mountaintop is one of the most satisfying and enlightening experiences. Mountaintops are transformative. Have you ever been on a mountaintop?

When I was a teenager, I was involved with a program for high school students; it was a program sponsored by the Rotary Club that was designed to help young women and men like myself grow into good leaders. We participated in community service projects, we discussed the lives of important leaders both contemporary and from times long past, and we were given activities designed to challenge us mentally and physically to help us tap into our inner strength. One of those activities was to climb a mountain, and not just any mountain, but Mt. San Gorgonio, or “Mt. San G,” as we locals called it. It is located about 90 miles east of Los Angeles and 30 miles east of San Bernardino, CA where I grew up. At 11,503 feet tall, the summit of Mt. San Gorgonio is the highest peak in Southern California. It is a majestic, awe-inspiring, and imposing geologic feature of the San Bernardino Valley that stands at the edge of the Mojave Desert and is so high that it is snow-capped year-round, even when temperatures at its base soar above 110°F. One beautiful Sunday in spring, we set out on a journey to climb Mt. San G. We didn’t climb the entire 11,000+ feet, because we were not trained mountain climbers. Instead, we started our hike from around 8,000 feet, but the remaining 3,000 feet were definitely a huge challenge. Back and forth along the winding trail, we slowly ascended the mountain. The air was thin and cool, growing thinner and colder the higher we climbed. I wasn’t in the best physical shape back then. I joined the high school marching band to get out of taking PE classes—and because of my love of playing music. Hiking up a mountain was physically demanding for me, but I pressed on. I persevered. Most of the trip I was the chubby kid bringing up the rear of the group, but I made it. I made it to the top, and from the summit of Mt. San Gorgonio. The sky was deep blue, the air was clean and thin, and I could see for over a hundred miles from the beige sands of the Mojave Desert to the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean. It was a moment in my life when I saw the glory of God. It was truly a transformative experience. No wonder the disciples in the company of Jesus experienced something that transformed their lives.

There’s something transformative about mountaintop experiences. Peter, James, and John found themselves on a mountaintop with Jesus one day, as we heard in today’s

Gospel story. Mt. Tabor isn't nearly as tall as Mt. San G; in fact, by comparison, it's a puny little hill towering at 1,886 feet—that's only 94 feet taller than the Freedom Tower in Manhattan from its base to the tip of the antenna. But, Peter, James, John, and Jesus ascended to the top of Mt. Tabor so they could pray. Luke writes a lot about Jesus praying. In Luke's Gospel, we find Jesus going away to pray at key moments in his life: at his baptism, in the Garden of Gethsemane, after feeding five thousand people, and several other places. This episode in the life of Jesus comes after some important events earlier in Chapter 9: we are told that Herod was perplexed at reports that somebody was still going around preaching about God's kingdom, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead, because he had already beheaded John the Baptist. Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand people on a plain. After all this, Jesus asked his disciples, "But, who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." It must have been a tiring few days for them; they probably needed a retreat, so they went up to the top of a mountain to pray. And, at the summit of Mt. Tabor, God's glory was revealed to them once again. In the company of Moses and Elijah—icons of the Law and the Prophets—the three disciples saw Jesus transfigured before their very eyes as the fulfillment of all the Law and the Prophets. They caught a glimpse of the glory of God that was to be revealed in the Anointed One through his death and resurrection. A voice then came down from heaven saying, "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him." Words similar to those spoken at Jesus' baptism. One can only imagine how transformative that mountaintop experience must've been for them.

The difference between transformation and transfiguration is that transformation means something has changed from one form to another, like a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. But transfiguration means that Jesus's appearance changed, but not his form. At the transfiguration, Peter, James, and John saw the figure of Jesus in his future glory. God's glory was revealed to the disciples, and it happened, not in isolation, but in community—in the community of three of the living disciples and two of the patriarchs who had gone before. Jesus could not shine alone. In this world, the glory of God needs us to witness it in order to be fully realized. The disciples wanted to bask in the radiance of the transfigured Jesus along with the great ones of old; they wanted to build three booths and stay a while. But their experience was not meant to stay on that mountaintop; they were to be witnesses of that glorious moment to the world. That's why the story that follows the Transfiguration is so important, because it is a testament to how a mountaintop experience is meant to bring about transformation in the world. Confronted by a crowd trapped by the brokenness of a convulsing boy, the boy's father cried out for help. The disciples were unable to heal him—perhaps their own transformation was not yet complete—but Jesus, frustrated that the disciples still didn't get it, went and healed the boy. The experience of the glory of God did not occur with Jesus alone and is not supposed to stay on the mountaintop; it needs to have witnesses to tell and show others.

God's glory is fully realized in the company and community of others. We are not supposed simply to bask in our own experience of God, like the disciples wanted to do by building booths. We are to testify to the mountaintop experiences we have—those moments when we know that God is present in our lives—so that we can help heal the convulsing boys of our own reality. What do I mean? What happens in here, the transformation that we experience in here where we encounter the risen Christ is for us to bask in for a short while, but that's not the end of it. We are to be the witnesses outside in the world. Now I have no doubt that you're already doing that in some way, wherever you are, whatever you do, whomever you encounter. But what could we be doing? Now that the pandemic seems to be tapering off, what could each of us do in our separate lives, and what could we as a community do to witness to those outside the walls and doors of this place? What could we say and do to testify that we have had a mountaintop experience, we have seen the transfigured Christ, and we have been transformed by it? How can we better proclaim that we believe in a God of unparalleled love and mercy, and that we follow the wisdom of his Son, Jesus Christ, in order to say to somebody else, "God loves you too."? What challenges do we have to overcome as a community in order to make God's glory more real for each other and for those we haven't met yet? Mountaintop experiences give us a glimpse of the way things could be. Mountaintop experiences reveal to us a future glory, but one that is not without its valleys.

Transfiguration Sunday is always the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday before we begin our observance of a holy Lent. This is our mountaintop experience in the liturgical life of the Church that shows us the glory of the Resurrection at Easter, but first we must traverse the great valley of Lent.

Before you leave today, I encourage you, as I always do when we focus on the Transfiguration, to take a look at the beautiful stained glass window just to the left of the narthex doors. It is a beautiful depiction of The Transfiguration. Meditate on the transfigured Jesus as he is revealed as the Son of God and Savior of the world in the same moment. Let yourself be carried back 2,000 years to the top of Mt. Tabor. Imagine Jesus in his full glory being revealed to you as the one who can provide bread when you're hungry, water when you're thirsty, healing when you're sick, reassurance when you're anxious or despondent, comfort when you're grieving, companionship when you're lonely, and delight when you're joyful. Whether life has you on a mountaintop, in a valley, or some place in between today, let the Transfiguration transform you. Let Christ's epiphany light shine within you. Testify to it and go heal those who are convulsing. Amen.

#### Resources

"San Gorgonio Mountain," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San\\_Gorgonio\\_Mountain](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gorgonio_Mountain)

"Mt. Tabor," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount\\_Tabor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Tabor)

Cláudio Carvalhaes, "Commentary on Luke 9:28-36, (37-43)," [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2756](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2756)