

Sermon for Last Epiphany (Transfiguration)
Sunday, February 7, 2016
“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.

The Gospel story today takes us on a journey—a journey to a mountaintop. There is something magnificent about mountaintops. 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 did things to challenge us mentally and physically. One of our activities was to climb a mountain, and not just any mountain, but Mt. San Gorgonio, or “Mt. San G,” as we locals called it. Located about 30 miles east of San Bernardino, CA where I grew up and at 11,503 feet high, the summit of Mt. San Gorgonio is the highest peak in Southern California. So, one beautiful spring Sunday, we set out on a journey up the mountain. Granted, we started our hike at about 8,000 feet, but the remaining 3,000 feet were certainly a challenge. Back and forth along the trail, we slowly ascended the mountain. I wasn’t in very good physical shape back then. I joined the high school marching band in part because it fulfilled the physical education requirement and I wouldn’t have to take any other PE classes. So, you can imagine how physically demanding this hike must have been, 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 nearly 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.

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 high as Mt. San G; in fact, in comparison, it’s a puny little hill towering

at 1,886 feet. 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 praying at key moments in his life: at his baptism, in the Garden of Gethsemane, 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. Then Peter stated that Jesus was the Messiah, in response to the question, "But, who do *you* say that I am?" And then Jesus foretold his own death. It must have been a tiring few days for them, and so they got away, went up to the top of a mountain to pray. And, at the summit of Mt. Tabor, God's glory was revealed once again. In the company of Moses and Elijah, the three disciples of Jesus saw him transfigured before their very eyes; they caught a glimpse of the glory of God that was to be revealed in the Anointed One through his death and resurrection. And then a voice came down from heaven, "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.

Mountaintop experiences often give perspective to the person standing at the summit. Moses saw the promised land, but one that he would never enter. Jesus's glory was revealed, but before then, he was to be tried and crucified. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of a mountaintop experience where he saw a new experience of equality for people in this country, just hours before he would be shot dead. Mountaintop experiences often reveal to us a future glory, but one that is not without its valleys. Transfiguration Sunday is always the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. It 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.

I am continuously awe-struck by the stained glass window just to the left of the narthex doors. It is a depiction of The Transfiguration. It is a beautiful depiction of Jesus as he is revealed as the Son of God and Savior of the world in the same moment. After mass, take a look at the window. Take in the mystery and awe of The Transfiguration. 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 Son of God, as the Savior of the world, as your Savior, 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.

Let The Transfiguration transform you. Whether life has you on a mountaintop, in a valley, or some place in between today, let Christ's epiphany light shine within you. Amen.

Resources

"San Gorgonio Mountain," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gorgonio_Mountain

"Mt. Tabor," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Tabor