

## Preparing for Glory

*A sermon for the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, 2025*

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*Mountaintop experiences are glorious, empowering, and wonderful. How do we navigate, survive, and live out our Christian vocation in the valleys between those peaks?*

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Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany. This means that this week is the beginning Lent. Tuesday is Shrove Tuesday, with all of the traditions around pancakes, carnivals, and confession it brings. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, when we begin Lent with a solemn ceremony of reconciliation, cleaning ourselves up spiritually so that we can start this holy season on the right foot.

Our Gospel passage this morning is Luke's telling of the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop. We hear this passage twice each year. Once on August 6, the Feast of the Transfiguration, when we recall the event and contemplate the awesome revelation it offers about who Jesus Christ is.

Today, when we hear this passage, we are looking, with Jesus and the disciples, toward Jerusalem. We know we are about to begin our Lenten journey and that between the Transfiguration—one of the original mountaintop experiences—and the heights of Easter joy, lie the valleys of Lent and Holy Week. It is a powerful, holy journey that we go on for the next forty days or so. One for which we need to be prepared.

### LIFE ON THE MOUNTAINTOP

Peter, James, and John, the same disciples who recently witnessed Jesus raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, climb the mountain with Jesus, expecting to learn and pray. This is typically what they do when they go away to a high place. They are not expecting their prayers this day to reveal to their eyes a sign of the kingdom of God and all its glory in their midst.

Jesus becomes an impossibly bright figure, his clothes flashing white, like lightning. This could only be a symbol of God's presence. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus, famous leaders from the Judean past and signs that something truly godly is taking place. Moses, famously, climbed Mount Sinai, surrounded by clouds, smoke, and flashing light, to converse with God and bring to the people of Israel instructions about their covenant.<sup>1</sup> Elijah spoke powerful prophecies and did miracles again and again to prove to people the power and presence of God. For these two men to appear with the transfigured Jesus demonstrates the holiness of his ministry in the world.<sup>2</sup>

But this is not only a comment on holiness and glory. Moses and Elijah are the two people in Judean history who have departed, but whose bodies were never recovered. Scripture tells us that Moses died and was buried, but nobody knows where. Elijah does not die, but is taken up to heaven in a whirlwind and a fiery chariot. For these two to be here, with Jesus who has just shown his own power to raise the dead, means the disciples are standing in a place where even what they thought they knew about life and death must be questioned. And, as followers of

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<sup>1</sup>Exodus 19–20

<sup>2</sup>1 Kings 17ff

Jesus, what does this mean for them and their own lives? They are so concerned that they tell nobody of what they have seen and heard.

### **EMPOWERED FOR MINISTRY**

The voice of God is heard, reminding them of just who Jesus is and they must listen to him. This voice was heard once before, at Jesus's baptism in the Jordan by his cousin John. On that occasion, the voice identified Jesus as the Son of God and empowered the ministry he was about to begin. Years of teaching, preaching, and healing, all symbols of the kingdom of God breaking into the world. At the Transfiguration, the voice of God once again identifies Jesus as the Son of God and empowers the second part of his ministry. This second part of Jesus's earthly ministry includes the final journey to Jerusalem, the hard work of speaking truth to the heart of injustice, and the sacrifice on the Cross. It is a deep valley to pass through before the next mountaintop of Easter morning.

This two-part pattern is so important that our worship this morning follows it. We begin with a focus on the Word, hearing readings from the Bible and reflecting on what God is revealing to us in them today. Even the lectern at St John's shows statues of Moses and Elijah standing with the signs of the Gospel of Jesus. After hearing the Word, we stop to reflect and pray, like Jesus and the disciples on the mountain, listening for the voice of God in our midst today. Then the altar is prepared and we move our focus to the sacrifice of Jesus and his offering of his body and blood as sacrament for us. We participate in communion and, empowered twice by the Word of God, we set out into the world to undertake our ministries.

### **A CHRISTLIKE LIFE**

Mountaintop experiences like the Transfiguration are exciting and wonderful. We remember them easily and count them as some of the most important moments in our lives. They are empowering, enlightening, and inspiring. But, all things come to an end, and when our time on the mountaintop concludes, we must head back down. Just like Jesus and the disciples, we make our way to the valley and all of its challenges so that we can find and climb to the next peak.

We may be empowered for the hard work of Christian life, but it is still hard work. This Gospel passage is read in churches today to remind people who are preparing for baptism at Easter of the glory that waits for them there. The journey between here and there is challenging, but it is worth every moment of difficulty. This passage is also for us who have already been baptized. We are accompanying those preparing for the sacrament of rebirth, but also remembering what it is to live as Christians.

We are reminded, like the disciples, to share the work of ministry. We are a body, formed in baptism, and each part has a role to play. No one part can do it all. We are reminded that the work before is not something we can do without God. We cannot live on the mountaintop forever, but when we go down to the valley, God goes with us. God asks us to do our best and, when we are sincere in that effort, God helps with the parts we cannot manage. We are also reminded to take those empowering, refreshing, preparing moments seriously. We wouldn't set out on a long journey without checking that we've packed appropriately, know the route, and have some plans in case of emergency. These moments of Word, sacrament, prayer, and fellowship are our best preparation

for the work and ministry of Christian life.

The road ahead of us is not an easy one, but it is also not one that we walk alone. We go empowered, refreshed, and prepared. We go with one another, through the valley toward the glory of Easter's peak. And, every step of the way, we go with Jesus. Thanks be to God.