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Last Sunday after the Epiphany  
Feast of the Transfiguration

Today's lessons are taken from Exodus and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter and Matthew.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

In 1992 I was taking a three-month sabbatical in Southington, Connecticut. As part of that sabbatical I went to North Carolina to the Episcopal Church Conference Center which is in Kanuga, which is near Hendersonville, North Carolina. During that time one of the days I decided, with another fellow, to take a hike in the Blue Ridge Mountains. We parked pretty far up, but we hiked, and as we hiked it was very cloudy and foggy; and finally we got to the top of this mountain peak. Then all of a sudden the fog began to burn off, and the sky was such so bright. You could see for miles -- you could see Tennessee -- you could see into North Carolina. It was just absolutely beautiful! I have to say that standing there I had a religious experience; I felt more than ever the presence of God on that mountaintop.

Mysterious things happen on mountains. In today's Old Testament lesson from Exodus, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me here on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commands, which I have written for their instruction.' Then Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God." This turned out to be one of the most pivotal events in human history, for there Moses received The Ten Commandments.

In the gospel reading from Matthew 17, there's another pivotal and mysterious event that occurred on a mountain. Jesus is on the mountain with his three closest disciples, Peter and James and John, and on this mountain these three disciples saw Jesus transfigured. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white and the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will make three shelters; one for you. one

for Moses, and one for Elijah.“ While he was still speaking a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this they fell facedown to the ground terrified, but Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,“ he said, “Don’t be afraid.“ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

And in this morning’s reading from the epistle, Peter testifies to that startling event. He writes, “We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the majestic glory saying, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard his voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”

I want to give you an invitation this morning to come with me to the mountain. In a figurative sense, let’s leave the everyday world behind for a few moments and stand with those three disciples on that mountain. In the first place, we also need to see who Jesus really is.

Some years ago I had a strange dream, and I’m not making this up for the purpose of the sermon. I was passing through a time of great difficulty and unhappiness, and in my dream I was to be offered a personal interview with Jesus. And I thought, “Ah! I will finally ask you this; I will ask you that. Now I shall get an answer to all my questions and the key to all my problems.” Believe it or not, in the glory of Jesus’ presence, it was not that I forgot to ask him anything; it seemed utterly unnecessary and meaningless. Somehow, I had an overwhelming feeling that even Jesus would not be able to explain to me because my mental grasp was so tiny, but there came an overwhelming feeling of supreme joy that questions no longer needed to be answered. It was sufficient to know there was an answer. I knew that all was well, and somehow I knew that all was well for everyone.

We all need to see Jesus; or as John Newton has put it: “How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer’s ear; it soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds and drives away his fear. It makes the wounded spirit whole and calms the troubled breast, is manna to the hungry soul and to the weary rest.”

Yes, come to the mountain and see who Jesus is. He is more than Moses and

Elijah, more than the law and prophets. See Jesus' face shine with the love of God. Come with me to the mountain, catch a glimpse of who he is, and perhaps on that mountain we will catch a glimpse of what we too can be.

I think of Martin Luther King's great speech at the gate of Washington at the Lincoln Memorial. He had a dream; been to the mountaintop. Those disciples also saw Jesus transfigured. They could not know that a transfiguration was also taking place within them. To be sure, that transfiguration would not be apparent until Pentecost, but it was happening. You cannot come into the presence of Jesus without becoming conscious of what, by his grace, you might one day be.

Disraeli put it this way: "To believe in the heroic makes heroes." And Nahru wrote: "The mere act of aiming at something big, makes you big. Strive for great accomplishments, and you will accomplish much." Or as Teddy Roosevelt once wrote: "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much or suffer much because they live in gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

The disciples stayed in the company of greatness, and thus they became great as well. Even to believe that greatness is possible has extraordinary merit.

When I was in high school, I took an ancient history course in my freshman year, and I was asked to write a paper on Augustus Caesar. I got to know almost everything that I could about Augustus Caesar; I read all kinds of things in the library. Augustus Caesar was barely five feet seven inches tall, pale, delicate with a weak throat and poor circulation who all his life had to live on a strict diet and constantly struggle against bodily frailty. Yet seeing what Augustus Caesar did, one element in his amazing career is undoubtedly the fact that in his youth he visited Theogonies, a famous astrologer, to have his horoscope cast. When Theogonies saw the young man's horoscope, so runs the story, he was so impressed with the marvel of it that he fell on his face and worshiped him.

You and I do not believe in astrology, but you see Augustus did. It was a superstition but he believed it worked. All his later life through difficulty and peril and burden-bearing and inner struggle for conquest, he kept an undiscouraged faith in his destiny which the stars had foretold. It was this undiscouraged faith that the disciples discovered had helped transform their

lives. There is something about a mountaintop experience that can help you be more than you ever have been before.

Come with me to the mountain. It is there that relationships can be made right. Come with me to the mountain. See who Jesus is. See what by his grace you and I can yet become. Perhaps on that mountain we will gain new confidence in God's presence in our lives. All of us believe in an intellectual way that God is with us, but sometimes we need a mountaintop experience to make that intellectual belief a divine reality in our lives. We are not in control, but we can trust God who is in control. And that's the good news I want to share with you today on this last Sunday of Epiphany. God, who is in control, can be trusted.

In 1351 the Earl of Wickham decided to found a college called New College in Oxford, England. The times were grim. The bubonic plague had taken a terrible toll on the population. People were angry and frightened. Nevertheless, the Earl of Wickham trusted God with all his heart, and he was determined to make his new college succeed. Wickham paid for the building of the college and the college flourished. Centuries later, it was time to replace the oak beams in the main hall of New College in Oxford. The authorities approached the Earl of Wickham's descendants to ask for a donation to cover the cost of the new beams. To their surprise, the Earl's descendants were ready for them. "We have been waiting for you," they said. "The oak beams are ready for you." It turned out that the Earl of Wickham, over five hundred years earlier, had foreseen the need of replacing the beams and implanted a grove of oaks specifically for that purpose during his lifetime.

My friends, that's faith. That's the kind of faith we need for the living of our lives. Where do we find it? Where do we obtain the confidence in the future so that we might invest in that which is lasting? We are already in the right place.

Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst, was counseling a man who had been in therapy for six months and was getting no better. Finally Jung said, "Friend, I can't do any more for you. What you need in your life is God." "How do I find God, Dr. Jung?" the man asked. "I don't know," said Jung, "but I suspect that if you find a group of people some place that believe in God passionately and just spend time with them, you will find God." The man did just that, and he was healed.

This sanctuary - this church - is **our** mountaintop. We are together with others who believe in God passionately. In our own minds and hearts, let us see who Jesus really is. Let us see ourselves as we might be by God's grace. Let us gain confidence, confidence in God's presence and providence that we might be strong for the living of this hour.

It's like a wonderful song that I always sort of have in the back of my head that Barbra Streisand sang years ago in the musical *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*. Barbra Streisand sang: "On a clear day, rise and look around you, and you'll see who you are. On a clear day, how it will astound you that the glow of your being outshines every star."

The being of Jesus out shown every star, and as we fix our gaze on him we can glow too because we learn from Jesus who we really are. One that mountain in his presence, we gain confidence in his purpose for our lives, and as Barbra Streisand sang in the last two lines of the chorus: "You can hear from far and near a world you've never, never heard before. On a clear day, on a clear day, you can see forever and ever and evermore."

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs