

**The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
The Transfiguration of Our Lord
February 10, AD 2002**

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Matthew 17:1-9

1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3 Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. 4 Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters-one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them. "Get up," he said. "Don't be afraid." 8 When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." (NIV)

In the summer of 1996, I attended our church body's first National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts. The conference began with a concert on a Sunday evening-over 100 choir members with an orchestra. The next morning was a special service, complete with about 1000 people in the congregation singing in full voice, accompanied by choirs and all kinds of instruments, concluding with a celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was positively exhilarating to be enveloped in all that sound, glorying in the Lord's presence! But then on Monday afternoon of the conference, I was eating lunch with a friend. We were sitting out on the patio, overlooking the shore of Lake Michigan. Someone we knew came up to us and told us that the day before one of my Seminary classmates had been in an auto accident in Utah, where he had been filling in at a church who had no pastor at the time. The details were still sketchy-something about a large truck toppling over on our friend's little Plymouth Neon. What was known was that he had been killed in the accident.

I still recall walking away from that cafeteria with some other friends who had just heard the news. All our faces were blank. If we had been on a lofty mountaintop that morning in the worship service, we had all just come down the mountain awfully fast.

But that's life, isn't it? Those moments we have when everything seems good and right, moments that are free from worry and pain and filled with laughter or peace-they never seem to last long, do they? The serene mountaintops are usually followed by valleys deep and dark.

What do we do when we find ourselves on a bright mountaintop? How about (more likely) in the bottom of an ominous valley? God tells us. He says, "Look at and listen to Jesus."

Mountain? Valley? Jesus is there.

He went both places for us.

This section begins, "After six days..." Six days after what? If we turn back a page we see what happened a few days earlier. Jesus has told his disciples that he is about to go down into the darkest valley: **From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. (Matthew 16:21)**

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples and one of his close friends, was having nothing of that: **Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22)** But Jesus, in no uncertain terms, said it was going to be so: **Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." (Matthew 16:23)** Jesus planned to go down into the valley of the shadow of death. Peter wanted none of that.

Now, just a few days after that exchange, Jesus leads Peter, along with James and John, up onto a high mountain by themselves. There Jesus' appearance changed. He began to glow with blazing light, shining as bright as the sun! Just then, Moses and Elijah, two great prophets of old, appear and begin to talk with Jesus.

We can guess what Peter is thinking: "This is what I'm talking about! This is you, Jesus! This is the glory you deserve. No more talk about suffering. No more talk about dying. This is the way things should be-up here, away from those who don't appreciate you, away from those who would get rid of you. It is good for us to be here. Let's all stay on the mountaintop! Glorious mountaintops are way better than dark valleys, after all."

Peter should have thought a little more before he spoke. Moses and Elijah were there. These were both men who had been on mountaintops. Moses we heard about in our first Scripture lesson. God summoned him onto Mount Sinai and there enveloped him in the cloud of his presence. Can you imagine that? God so often feels far away; Moses felt him as near as the water droplets condensing on his skin.

Moses got to stay on that mountain for forty days. That's a long time! But you know, Moses lived to be 120 years old. When you do the math, you see that relatively little of his life was spent on the mountain. He had to come down. He had to come down and do the dirty work of dealing with a stubborn and

rebellious people. More than that, he had to come down from the mountain and continue to struggle with his own rebellious tendencies and their consequences.

Centuries after Moses, Elijah the prophet would go up on the same mountain. He would come there tired and frustrated, fed up with all the hard-heartedness among his people. And God would come to him on that mountain. God would speak to him in a still, small voice—a comforting whisper that told him that God was still in control and still doing good in the world, even though Elijah couldn't see it. Yet Elijah, too, would have to come down from the mountain and get back to work, struggling against evil all around.

Jesus would come down from that mountain, despite Peter's protests. In fact, if Peter had listened to what Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah, he would have known that. Luke tells us, **Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. (Luke 9:30,31)** They were talking about the same thing that Jesus had been talking about with his disciples: his approaching suffering and death.

Peter had his own ideas. God the Father stepped in, though, and gently beat those ideas out of his head. **While he [Peter] was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)** "Peter, listen to Jesus! Don't listen to your own grandiose and misguided thoughts. My Son knows what he's talking about."

It was true. Jesus knew that all the glory of that mountaintop and more was rightfully his. He was the Son of God! At the same time, Jesus also knew that the Father wanted him to come down from that mountain. His Father wanted—and Jesus wanted it, too—to go down into the abyss of deep darkness. The plan was for Jesus to suffer, to sink down to the depths of degradation. The plan was for Jesus to be despised, not just by people, but by his loving Father. Why? What had Jesus done to deserve that kind of shame? Nothing. We have earned that shame. On his cross, Jesus was going to bear it in our place.

Without the valley, you see, there could be no mountaintop for us. Someone needed to pay for our crimes. Someone needed to let himself be brought low so that we could be lifted high. Someone needed to take the blame for us so that we could be forgiven. Someone had to go to the valley so that we could be exalted to the mountaintop. Jesus did. Without the valley, there could be no mountain.

Of course, without the mountaintop, the valley would have been meaningless. Jesus had to be more than just a man who died. He had to be the only Son of God. He had to be big enough to carry the sins of the world and to pay for them all at once. And not only did he have to die for us, but he had to come roaring back from the dead, to assure us that our sins are paid for and that death can't keep a hold on us.

In a few minutes, we'll sing the hymn "Beautiful Savior." When you sing it, remember why Jesus is beautiful. He's beautiful because he shines brighter and purer than all the angels in the sky; he proved that on the mount of the transfiguration. But he's beautiful also because for us, and for our salvation, he came down from that mountain to give his life and rescue us.

Mountain? Valley? Jesus is there. He went to both places for us.

He goes to both places with us.

In spite of all the explanations, though, we can relate to Peter, can't we? Who needs those valleys anyway? If Jesus can take us to the mountain, why can't he just leave us there?

The life of a Christian is a life like Christ's. And remember, Christ came down that mountain where he was transfigured. Martin Luther remarked that the normal rhythm of the Christian's life is uphill, downhill, uphill, downhill. Up the mountain, down into the valley. He was right. Christian spirituality is not a spirituality of glory, but a spirituality of the cross.

God brings us to mountaintops sometimes. Sometimes we see his grace in action in a way that we can't miss: some unexpected blessing, some answered prayer, some moment when God seems near. But mountaintops are not a place to stay, as Peter learned. They are places to prepare-to prepare for the coming valleys.

And they will come. The dark valleys that we must enter may be life-shaking hardships: illnesses, deaths of people close to you, the breakup of families, financial crises. They may be more routine: the pressure of school (or pressure put on you by people at school), the stress of going to a job that you don't like, the stress of not having a job to go to., the struggles of being single, the struggles of being married, grief from your parents, grief from your kids. The depth may vary, but a valley is a valley.

Some of you are in a valley right now. Others may be nearer a mountaintop. Some of you might be somewhere in between. Others may go up and down so much that you don't have the foggiest idea where you are anymore. And to complicate things, where you are might change by the end of the day. Life-even Christian life-is like that.

So what can God do for us? Well, whether we're in a valley or on a peaceful mountain, he can do and does what he did for Peter, James and John. God takes a bright highlighter and paints his only Son. He says, "Look at Jesus. Listen to him." Jesus knows what mountains are like, and, boy, does he know what valleys are like. He's been to both places, and now he goes both places with us.

Whether you're on a mountain or in a valley, Jesus is there.

He is there, humbled to the point of death, showing you the depth of his love.

He is there, risen and glorified, showing you that a mountaintop awaits you.

His voice is there, assuring you that you are somebody-somebody he knows and loves and has adopted with water and word.

His voice is there, like a light shining in a dark place, absolving you from all guilt giving you peace with God.

His touch is there, assuring you that his body and blood, not yours, have paid for your sins.

He is there in the valley, telling you that its darkness will not claim you, telling you that the mountain of his glory is your final and permanent home.

Jesus is there, wherever you are. Look at him. Listen to him

At the end of today's service, we will say farewell to Alleluia. Alleluia, that simple song of praise to the Lord, will not be heard again until Easter morning. Why would we not sing Alleluia? To remind ourselves (as if we needed reminding) that dark valleys, not just bright mountaintops, are an integral part of a Christian's life. There are times, allowed and even given by God, for us to carry crosses.

There are times to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. But he is with us in the valleys, too, not just on the bright mountains. And the joyful Alleluias will return in full force someday, thanks to Jesus.

Are you in a valley? Are you on a mountaintop? Wherever you are, look at Jesus, the one who knows them both. And follow his voice; he knows where he's going.
Amen.