

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

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In the industrial area between Magnolia and Queen Anne just north of downtown Seattle, the Burlington Northern Railroad runs one of the few remaining roundhouses in the U.S. In the switchyard, there is a massive turntable so that crews can move the huge locomotive engines into one of two dozen bays for maintenance and then back out into service on one of several tracks; even 180° from the direction it came in.

The liturgy this morning functions a lot like that turntable.

On the first of December last year, the first Sunday of Advent, we began the new liturgical year in anticipation of the light coming in the incarnation of the Christ-child. We moved from Advent into the lights of the Christmas season.

And then we traveled from Christmas to Epiphany, when a light in the night sky guided Gentile magi to encounter with shepherds a new fullness of life and light. Epiphany is about light, about illumination. Epiphany is about the revelation of the glory of God.

This reading on the last Sunday of Epiphany completes a frame for the season by echoing the story of Jesus' Baptism that we heard on the first Sunday of Epiphany. John's baptism was for the transforming of hearts. And as the embodiment of God's Divine glory, Jesus had to experience the human process of awakening that begins with a change of heart and mind.

Today, everything pivots. There is darkness and death ahead. And yet, there is also the promise of a different kind of light beyond the suffering that lies in this new direction.

Six days after his first prediction of his passion, Jesus has taken three of his followers from his inner circle up a high mountain. Once there, the once invisible, unapproachable light where God dwells becomes radiant and visibly approachable light in Jesus. Peter, James and John see Jesus as the Christ; they see the Anointed One both as he already is and as he is not yet.

And so, the story of the transfiguration, if you can see it, is more about what it means to be a follower of Christ than it is a declaration about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

In the reading from Exodus this morning, six days have passed after YHWH had covered a high mountain with clouds. Then, Moses went up to receive the gift of Torah – the teachings – from YHWH. Moses, like the prophet Elijah, both return frequently to the mountains seeking illumination and inspiration for their earthly ministries.

Now, mountains represent spiritual experiences in many, if not most, religions and wisdom traditions. And yet, there is something distinctive about the mountains in these stories. They are not as conspicuous as Mt. Fuji in Japan; not as isolated and tall as the Black Hills of the Dakotas; not as shared across world religions as Tibet's Mt. Kailash: all sacred mountains.

The mountains of the Holy Land are situated within a few days walk from the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth, and they are surrounded by rolling desert hills, coastal plains and flat, unforested grassland, making them appear to rise from all parts of the planet. In the ancient Middle Eastern mind, *these* sacred mountains were the center of the world; a point of connection between Heaven and Earth.

And in Matthew's transfiguration story, Moses and Elijah not only represent the Torah and the Prophets, they are two people who have encountered what Evan Eisenberg called "the radically undomesticated YHWH on sacred peaks far from empire and its discontents." Matthew has brought them back to *confirm* that Jesus Christ is in an unbroken flow with the teachings and the prophets.

Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, renews and reinvigorates Torah. He does not replace or remove the teachings that Moses received and that the prophet Elijah reinforced.

While Jesus, Moses and Elijah are conferring, a shining cloud descends and a voice interrupts Peter, repeating the words spoken at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I have delighted." And then, the voice adds a crucial instruction: "Listen to him."

Jesus touches his flustered friends and tells them to rise without fear. They see now only Jesus. And it's time to go down the mountain and to the suffering and death that will come before the resurrection. Only now Peter, James and John walk toward Jerusalem with Jesus the Anointed.

The experience of enlightened transfiguration is not meant to be held in memory or photographs or journals, or captured in tabernacles. Our encounters with the "radically undomesticated YHWH on sacred peaks" are never escapes from the world. They are given to provide strength and insight for the walk of love, truth and goodness; the path of peace in a world of conflict. The path back down the mountain carries us into the world that lies on the other side of Lent and Holy Week.

The great spiritual traditions all insist on the return to the world of conflict and contraction; to find ways to engage divisions and hostilities and life's inevitable difficulties. And they distinguish the awareness of that world that we have *before* illumination from the awareness we have *after* illumination.

An old Zen teaching says: "Before enlightenment, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers. While seeking enlightenment, the mountains are not mountains and the rivers are not rivers. After enlightenment, the mountains are mountains and the rivers are rivers."

Mountaintop moments – those fleeting times when we recognize and receive the creating consciousness that loves and animates all creation – these are moments of renewal and encouragement that can transfigure us.

Life *before* coming into more direct contact with the Divine is difficult. Even as we laugh and celebrate and play, we face hardships – physical, emotional, financial. We face them armed only with our own wits and will. We scale mountains of hardship by sheer determination.

On spiritual mountaintops, we consciously connect to the Divine and begin to allow God to flow through us. Illuminated with God's light, we discover that we are not alone; that our energies can merge with

God's so that we can ride the Divine wind. Once we encounter the divine origins and nature of the spiritual life, we learn to "get up without fear" and to listen. Mountains are no longer mountains and rivers are no longer rivers.

When we return from the mountaintop, life is *still* difficult. Sorry about that. Even so, we walk toward Jerusalem with Christ beside us. We still face threats to our livelihoods or to our health, ruptures in relationships. Mountains are once again mountains and rivers, rivers.

The lesson is not to cling to the mountaintop experience. The new intent is to persevere, trusting in Divine grace to be with us and to flow from us, to radiate even from the cracks in our lives for others to notice. That's how God draws people around us walking in darkness toward the flicker of hopeful resurrection light on the other side of Lent.

Let me share a story with you from the Holy Land that the Bishop read to those of us on pilgrimage: "There are two seas in Palestine," the story begins. "One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. The River Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. So it laughs in the sunshine. And men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

"The River Jordan flows on out into another sea. Here there is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink.

"What makes this mighty difference in these neighbor seas? Not the River Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie; not in the country round about.

"This is the difference.

"The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The giving and receiving go on in equal measure. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps.

“The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. This other sea gives nothing. It is named Dead. There are two kinds of people in this world. There are two seas in Palestine.”

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