

Lectionary A February 26, 2017 Transfiguration Sunday  
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, Indiana  
Pastor Roberta Meyer

Exodus 24:12-18  
Psalm 2  
2 Peter 1:16-21  
Matthew 17:1-9

### On the Mountainside

Ever since Epiphany we have been on the side of a mountain with Jesus. And today we are on the top of a mountain.

I learned a lot about mountains last week while my sister and I spent a few days in the Smokey Mountains. When you are on the top of a mountain, you can see just how high you are. It gives you a kind of “rush.” It’s exciting being high and looking down on the world. It is definitely a Holy place. And after that rush and you make it back down to the valley you feel safe. There is a sigh of relief and a feeling of accomplishment.

But it’s being in between, on the side of the mountain, that is the hardest. Sometimes you have no way of knowing how far up or down you are. All you see are rocks and trees and sometimes a rushing brook lets you know which way is down. But you are surrounded with strange life and winding paths and walls of stone on both sides. It could be overwhelming. Sometimes you just feel like you want to hold on. You can’t see where you are going.

That’s kind of how I have felt as I read the Gospel lessons in Epiphany, holding onto the mountainside, listening to Jesus teach us. “*Blessed are the poor.*” “*Blessed are those who mourn...*” and so are “*those who hunger and thirst...*” and “*Those who are persecuted.*” Huh? Seems hard to hold onto, doesn’t it? Jesus is leading us on a winding path that doesn’t make sense. Then comes the part where Jesus says pluck out your eye and cut off your hand if they make you sin. This is drastic and I feel like I don’t know which way is up or down.

If that isn’t enough Jesus starts telling us to love our enemies. This mountainside stuff is really hard to navigate. If you want to get to the top or the bottom of that mountain in one piece, you just follow the path, no matter if it seems to be leading you in the opposite direction.

We finally reach the top of the mountain today, on Transfiguration Sunday, and we can see how far up we are and it is exciting and...that’s where we have those mountaintop experiences. They change your life. You are never the same again. That’s what happened to Peter, James, and John. “*And [Jesus] was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.*” And could that be Elijah and Moses talking to him? And as usual, Peter tried to grab hold of something familiar on that mountaintop. “Let’s build shelters for the three of them. Let’s just stay here.” But God took over. Hold on to something solid—now *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!”*

Wow! They heard something like that before. When John the Baptist baptized Jesus. “...just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.” But this time up on top of that mountain there is a little twist in the road. “Listen to him” is what the voice said. Sometimes listening to Jesus is like following that mountain path, you can’t tell which way is up or down. What seems right, Jesus is saying is the wrong direction. But that is when we forget what makes sense in our human way of thinking and just follow Jesus’ path.

Listen to him. There is a huge difference between hearing and listening. When we really listen to someone or something, what you hear gets inside you and changes you. When I was a teacher, I could tell when my students were really listening. They were absorbing what I was teaching and asking questions and applying what they were learning. Listening changed them.

Listen to him.

That means absorb all Jesus just taught on that mountainside. All that tough stuff. Really listening to Jesus changes us. We are never the same again. We see the world from a different perspective. Looking down from the mountaintop all of creation is beautiful. You don’t see the things that divide people, like skin color, or religion, or sexual orientation, or gender, or social status.

Listen to him.

And what does Jesus say? Get up and let’s go back down to the valley. Only in the Greek Jesus really says something more like, “be raised.” It is the same word used by the angel at the tomb telling what happened at Jesus’ resurrection. Commentator, David Lose, says that this Transfiguration story is another resurrection story, only not about Jesus. It is “*the resurrection story of the disciples, as they are pulled from their fear and failure to new life and courage.*” (Lose) They are changed. Things were never the same.

I’m beginning to understand how our faith increases. It’s when we are going up those mountain paths that we encounter hard places. Navigation is hard. That’s when we are smack in the middle of the trees and rock walls and we can’t see which way is up. But by God’s grace we make it out of the woods and find a place on top where everything looks different. Our mountaintop experience puts all the tough stuff in perspective. We have a new lease on life. We are resurrected. We are ready to head back down the mountainside. Things are still tough. The crags and snags don’t disappear. But now we know if we follow the path we will get where we are going safely. Our faith is stronger.

It was fun in the mountains last week with my sister. I didn’t like driving on those twisty mountain roads, but the view from the top was breathtaking. It changed me. Mountaintop adventures aren’t meant to last forever. As I drove down, out of the mountains the bumps and rocky places met us square in the face. I got a call about Ginny Landers. I made funeral arrangements with her daughter on the way home. A text came in on my Bluetooth, “Read message,” I said to the car. I heard over the car’s speaker, “Helen Wallington is in Hospice.”

I’m back on the mountainside with the people I love. Life is hard. Yesterday, I sat in Helen’s room, holding her hand, singing Amazing Grace just to her and me. This is a real tough place. It

is confusing. The mountaintop can't be seen, but it has changes us. You see, I didn't see a burning bush like Moses saw on his mountaintop, but I saw the ashes of the fire on the mountainside in the Smokeys and I heard the stories of bravery and compassion and generosity as the people of Gatlinburg clung to their own mountainside.

And I saw faith grow. And my faith grows. That's the secret of Jesus' words, "Be raised, and go back down." We are not alone in any of this, Helen and I, and all of us. We have each other and we have Jesus clinging to our crags with us. Listen to him. "*I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,  
I have already come;  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.*

Amen