

Sunday, February 15, 2026
Last Sunday after the Epiphany (Year A)

Matthew 17.1-9

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Lord, It Is Good For Us To Be Here”

Today we stand at a critical turning point, in more ways than one. As we metaphorically stand on the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James, John, Moses, and Elijah, we witness a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus. The point where things take a radical, and for Peter, James, and John, an unexpected turn into the unknown. From the day-to-day work of teaching, preaching, and healing, turning toward Jerusalem and the culmination of Jesus' life, his public ministry, and to a new life for him and for all. And for us, two millennia later, this is a turning point in our liturgical calendar, as we end the season after Epiphany and turn toward Lent. As we wrap up our look at how Jesus is manifest and revealed as the Son of the Living God, and begin preparation for Easter and the ultimate revelation of who Jesus is and who we are in the new light of Easter morning.

To more fully understand these two critical turning points, we need to take a step back. Six days, to be exact. It's right there at the beginning of today's Gospel reading: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves." So, what happened six days previous, that it served as a point of reference for this impromptu trip up a mountain?

A lot, actually. In a private moment with the disciples, Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16.13). After some discussion, Peter proclaims, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16.16). Which leads to further discussion as to what that means, particularly given that the Jews had long-held, ancient understandings regarding the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus goes on to inform them that while Peter is correct, that Jesus is the Messiah, that does not mean what they think it means. At which point he foretells his death and resurrection. Which sparks protests from the disciples, with Peter rebuking Jesus and Jesus responding, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16.23). Jesus then goes on to tell the disciples that "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt 16.24). A lot for the disciples to take in and process. Jesus has just completely blown apart what they thought they knew, about him and about what it means to be one of his followers. Undoubtedly resulting in much soul-searching by the disciples and talk among themselves about what it all meant and whether they could really continue on, given what Jesus was saying about himself and what he was asking of them. "Can you believe what Jesus said? How can the Messiah be killed? And what is that stuff about us taking up our own cross? I didn't sign on for THAT! What should we do? Are you going to stick it out and go to Jerusalem, or are you going to go back home?"

The whole experience likely being a turning point for the disciples in their own faith journeys. After allowing them to process for a while, it likely became obvious to Jesus that more explanation was needed. Something to help the disciples more fully understand what he had been talking about. To help them, if not now, at least after his death and resurrection, to understand what it all means. Why things are playing out this way. And most importantly, to see and understand their part in all this. Their part post-resurrection.

Trying to explain to everyone could get unwieldy and possibly just freak the disciples out even more. Jesus decides that the best way would be to enlist the aid of his inner circle, his right-hand men. Help them to understand, so they would be in a better position to keep things going after he was gone. Peter, James, and John, time for a little trip.

It is obvious that what happened on the mountaintop was not for Jesus' benefit. He already knew who he was, what his purpose was, and how that would be accomplished. He did not need to have a confab with Moses and Elijah. All of this was for the benefit of Peter, James, and John. To help them, as the inner circle, as those who would be the de facto leaders of the movement after he was gone, to more fully understand what he had been talking about six days previous. To give them what they would need to pick up the pieces and carry on with his work following the events to come in Jerusalem.

The most important point to convey was that what he had foretold—his death and resurrection—would not be tragic, but rather would be to the glory of God. That it would ultimately be in keeping with who he was as Son of God, as the Messiah. In so doing, also confirming that he was indeed the Son of God, the Messiah, the fulfillment of all that had been foretold in their history as God's people. Rather than try to explain it in words—we saw where the words had gotten him thus far—some demonstration of all this was in order. The way this happens is actually quite simple, and yet elegant, at the same time. When they got to the mountaintop, without explanation, Jesus “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 to him.”

So much imagery wrapped up in that one, wordless scene being witnessed by Peter, James, and John. Jesus' face shining and his clothes becoming dazzling white conveying his divine glory as God's Son. Reminiscent of the glory of God contained in their scriptures, in their history. And what they would not have grasped—could not have grasped—in the moment was that the transfigured Jesus, face shining and clothed in dazzling white, would be a foreshadowing of the glory of the Risen Christ they would encounter and experience in Jerusalem post-resurrection.

And the appearance of Moses and Elijah in that moment providing further confirmation of who Jesus was and of his ultimate purpose. Moses, the prophet who received the Law from God on another mountaintop many centuries before. Elijah, one of the greatest of the ancient prophets, considered to be an eschatological figure whose return would signal the imminent end of the ages. Together, representing, personifying, “the law and the prophets,” the totality of the Hebrew Scripture. The three—Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—standing together indicating Jesus has not come to eclipse or abolish the law and the prophets, but rather to fulfill it. To continue and complete the work they began. The work that God began through them in seeking to establish ongoing relationship with humankind. The culmination of God's ongoing attempt to be in relationship with us. Here, Jesus, God in the flesh, providing the means by which right relationship would be reestablished for all time.

And then, Peter has to go and make it weird. “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwelling here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Kind of implying, “We can forget about the other nine disciples, and just stay up here on this mountain, just the

six of us. Why bother going to Jerusalem and go through all that messiness you talked about? Kumbaya!”

Peter was naturally overwhelmed by what he had just witnessed and was trying to make sense out of it. Trying to hold on to it as he continued to process. And, perhaps, try to hold on to the moment so that what Jesus had foretold might be avoided. And yet, that was the point of the trek up the mountain. To demonstrate to Peter, James, and John, that what Jesus foretold six days before must happen. What Jesus foretold is the fulfillment of God’s plans that have been in the works from before time began. And that while the upcoming events in Jerusalem will be bloody and gory, that Jesus’ suffering and death may seem to be unthinkable in this moment, what will happen will actually result in a dramatic, subversive victory unlike anything that has ever occurred in the history of the world. An event that will be the culmination, the fulfillment, of the law and the prophets, revealing the full glory of God in a way that no one can deny.

Even as Peter is stumbling through, trying to hold on to the moment, still not grasping what this is all about, “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!’” God gently cutting Peter off. As if saying, “Peter, Peter, Peter. Chill. It’s okay. We’ve got this all figured out.” And, in telling Peter, James, and John to listen to Jesus, also sending a subtle, or perhaps not-so-subtle, message that they will all have a part to play as the drama in Jerusalem unfolds.

“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.’” No one would believe what happened anyway. Or, no one would understand. Besides, what happened on that mountain will pale in comparison to what will happen in Jerusalem on Easter Day. On that day, everything that happened on the mountain will make sense. And that is when Peter, James, and John will fully understand what they witnessed and be better able to guide the other followers of Jesus into life and ministry post-resurrection.

As I noted at the beginning of this sermon, just as the Transfiguration is a turning point in Jesus’ life and ministry, as well as the lives and ministries of Peter, James, and John, our time today on the mountaintop is also a turning point for us. A turning point in our liturgical calendar, as we end the season after Epiphany and turn toward Lent. We have just witnessed what is probably the greatest Epiphany story of all—the most dramatic way by which Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, complete with God’s own affirmation, meant to demonstrate how Jesus is not only the Son of God but also the fulfillment of God’s entire plan for relationship with us.

Like Jesus and the disciples, we now turn in a new direction, going with them down the mountain and heading for Jerusalem. In just a few days, on Ash Wednesday, we begin a new liturgical season: Lent. Our own personal and communal journey alongside Jesus and the disciples. A journey in which we, too, prepare for what unfolds in Jerusalem. Events that will and already have forever changed who we are as those who travel with Jesus, no matter where he leads. Be that up a mountain, be that to Jerusalem, Peter had it right, even if his motives were misguided: “Lord, it is good for us to be here.”