

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on February 14, 2010 (Last Epiphany, Year C)*

There's something about mountaintops. Everest, Kilimanjaro, McKinley – adventurous types are always trying to scale them or at least die trying. I guess there's a mystical and romantic quality about reaching the peak; like reaching out to touch the Holy Grail. Mountain climbing is often seen as a metaphor for life. Some continually strive to reach the pinnacle in order to enjoy the view; while others envision the journey itself as a symbol of the human condition. There's a reason comic strips always depict those seeking the meaning of life as reaching an old man on top of a mountain.

Mountaintops also play a central role in the Bible. If you see anyone going up a mountain, you know something big is going to happen. It's a tip-off as much as that screeching music in horror movies means that someone's about to get axed. Moses goes up a mountain to get the Ten Commandments; Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac on a mountain; Noah's ark landed on one; Moses died upon a mountain overlooking the Promised Land; the Jewish Temple was built atop Mount Zion; Jesus would often go up a mountain to pray; he taught his disciples in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount; and he was crucified on Mount Calvary. A lot of significant Biblical action takes place on mountains. And this morning we hear of another central mountaintop experience: the story of Jesus' transfiguration atop a high mountain.

Today most of our mountaintop experiences are metaphorical. Unless you're a skier. But in Scripture, to ascend a mountain was to seek closer communion with God. And these were often mystical encounters. Now we don't tend to climb mountains in order to feel closer to God – though that can certainly happen. But we know that the incarnate God dwells not just in the mountains but in the valleys and the streets and in our houses and churches and everywhere else we might find ourselves. And so when we speak of a “mountaintop experience” it's about spiritual union with the divine rather than a physical trek up the side of a mountain.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke eloquently about having been to the mountaintop. Of having seen the Promised Land of equality. Like Moses, he never did get to that place of promise; a place we're still working towards. But, like Peter and James and John, he caught a glimpse. And to catch even a fleeting glimpse of God's glory to be endowed with hope. To catch a glimpse in this lifetime of the future glory of God is a great gift. Every so often you can catch a glimpse of the in-breaking Kingdom of Heaven on earth. There are moments when we tangibly and powerfully feel the presence of God in our lives. I hope you've all experienced this in some form: in a church or walking down a street or with your family or perhaps literally on a mountaintop. And nothing beats it.

The intention, I think, is that these moments can sustain us in the darkness of the other times. The times when we feel alone or forsaken or hopeless and separated from the love of God. But in

between these glimpses of heaven on earth we often encounter moments fraught with frustration. Why can't that glimpse of glory be sustained? Why can't these mountaintop experiences endure? Why can't those transcendent moments we experience continue? Why can't they be the norm rather than the exception? Why can't we tap into them whenever we feel the need for rejuvenation rather than go days, weeks, months, and sometimes even years in between such experiences?

I don't know. Maybe we can't handle too much joy; maybe our circuits would get jammed. But I do know that we are promised the fullness of glory and joy and hope in heaven. And that on earth, through faith, we're given glimpses of what is to come.

This is precisely why we put so much time, effort, and loving attention into the Sunday morning liturgy. When it is done well it conveys the balance between the transcendence and immanence of the divine; between the mystery of God and God's tangible presence in the here and now. Good liturgy can bring the mountaintop into our midst. Liturgy that is seamless and without distraction can elevate us into a place of special communion with God. A hint of that transfiguring light blazes among us. When the incense billows and the voices of the choir sing out and the candles burn bright, there may be a moment or two when the earthly shroud is rent asunder and we catch that glimpse of heaven on earth. There's a reason we go to all this trouble; it's not just because we like it or it looks good. At its best, liturgy is a window into the divine; a view from the mountaintop.

Not every Sunday, perhaps. We all have those days when it feels like our worship is just about going through the motions. But the person in the next pew may be having a transcendent moment even as you're composing your shopping list. And next week it may well be reversed. But that's the goal of worship: to offer a glimpse of heaven.

Unfortunately, the mountaintop experience does not endure. We must eventually come back down the mountain; return to the reality of the human condition. And that's a shame. I'm sure the human part of Jesus would have liked to have stayed up on that mountain with Moses and Elijah and just called it a day. He too had a taste of that future glory when he would sit at the right hand of God. But he had a mission back in the world, back down the mountain, to show us the path to salvation and the forgiveness of sin. A mission that would restore him to the fullness of his glory but only before enduring the agony of the cross.

And so this day, the day we mark Jesus' transfiguration upon the mountaintop, offers us that glimpse of hope that will sustain us through the season of Lent. We're offered one last glimpse from the mountaintop; we're given one last chance to hear the alleluias ring out before we enter the wilderness. May it sustain you and fill you with hope in the days ahead.