

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Last Sunday of Epiphany, February 19, 2023.

Today's lessons are about mountain tops.

In the Exodus passage (**Exodus 24:12-18**), the Lord gives Moses and Joshua the Commandments on Mount Sinai. It was a venture of forty days and forty nights.

In **Psalms 99**, the Lord is "high above all peoples." And, we as one of those peoples, are to "proclaim the greatness of the Lord."

In the Second Letter of Peter (**2 Peter 1:16-21**), the disciples, while they were with Jesus on a mountain top, hear God's endorsement of Jesus. "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And in the Gospel (**Matthew 17:1-9**), Jesus takes Peter, James and John "up a high mountain," where Jesus is "transfigured." Jesus ends the experience with these words: "Get up and do not be afraid."

I suspect that we all have had some kind of "mountain top" experience. And this experience didn't have to be literally on a mountain top. It could have happened anywhere. And it will never be forgotten. Though it might remain only with us. In other words, not shared.

It is remembered because something clicked in our brain and perhaps in our heart. We were changed. Perhaps dramatically, but, more likely, in a gnawing kind of way. "Eats away" might be a better description of the impact than a "slap on the forehead."

Often these experiences are not shared. We deal with them alone. Well, not "alone." After all, there might be a partner in this relationship. And perhaps this partner is the Lord. But, even if the partner is the Lord, we are hesitant to speak to others about the experience.

And one of the reasons for our hesitancy might be that the experience didn't happen on a mountain top. Maybe it happened in combat. Maybe in a hospital emergency room. Maybe in an empty church midweek. Maybe in the middle of a

work day when interruptions are discouraged. Maybe when we left someone or someone left us. Or, maybe when we found someone or someone found us.

These experiences are the exception, not the rule. And the reason probably is that the experiences are a handful. They are tough to interpret, both in the short run and the long run.

Okay, Mr. Preacher. You've touched on a sensitive area. Now what? Well, far be it from me, who is very private about such matters, even to suggest how to handle these situations. I don't know whether they've even occurred in my lifetime. Certainly not in a single experience on a mountain top. But over time, down on level ground, in some subtle way, I suspect that God has spoken to me, and probably been disappointed that I didn't respond in some dramatic fashion.

Yet, here we are, in a setting that reminds us weekly that the Lord invites conversation, and even initiates conversation. We know this experience as prayer. Sometime we offer the prayer which the Lord himself taught us. And other times we simply ask for help or offer a thanks or share a concern.

God doesn't seem to care how we engage, as long as we engage. To engage is to honor the Lord. And to honor the Lord is a pretty darn good way to lead one's life. Because when we honor the Lord, we honor all that the Lord stands for and the people that the Lord stands for.

Today's lessons, by design, not accident, offer some pretty good advice to you and me.

Advice #1. "Forty days and forty nights." Insight, growth, awareness might not occur on day one. Maybe it's forty weeks, forty years. Stay with the program. God isn't going anywhere.

Advice #2. "Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God." Even if faith remains a mystery, it's okay. We're talking about a relationship with the Creator. Not an elected official, but the One who was there at the Beginning and will be there for as long as there is a "there."

Advice #3. “Trust your own instincts and experiences.” You are an “eyewitness.” Your experience counts. Don’t let anyone take away your curiosity, your perseverance, your conclusions, your flexibility, your conviction that you are special in God’s eyes.

And Advice #4. Matthew is crystal clear. “Listen to him!” with an exclamation mark. Oh yes, listen to all sorts of people, but in particular, listen to Jesus. Born in mystery, demonstrated sacrificial love, forgave to a fault and a price, rose from the dead, continues to point the way to a life well-lived, and with a promise for yet a better life with the Lord.

Today’s Collect captures this adventure. “Grant to us that we, beholding, by faith, the light of his countenance – that would be Jesus – may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory.”

A slam dunk for you and me? No way. What you and I do in this place and whenever and wherever and with whomever we exercise our faith, our trust, our conviction, is hard work. But, isn’t that what climbing mountains is all about?

There’s a reason why mountain top experiences are prominent in the Judeo-Christian Faith. God likes to hang out there. And, so do we. Because that’s where our canteen gets refilled, with what today’s Psalm calls “equity, justice and righteousness.” A theme, incidentally or not, that dominates contemporary boardrooms and websites. Some things don’t change.

Which is interesting in itself. We like to revisit mountain tops, don’t we? We worked hard to get there, and now we are eager to help others get there. “It’s not so hard,” we boldly say. “I’ll even go with you. And once you’ve done it, the next hike is easier. And pretty soon you’ll be taking on all sorts of challenges. And, when you stumble – and you will – it’s part of the mountain top experience - listen to what Jesus said to Peter, James and John: “Get up and do not be afraid.”

Amen.

Service of Holy Communion
Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – February 19, 2023

Hymn 441, stanzas 1-3 – In the cross of Christ I glory

In the cross of Christ I glory, towering o'er the wrecks of time;
all the light of sacred story gathers round its head sublime.

When the woes of life o'ertake me, hopes deceive, and fears annoy,
never shall the cross forsake me: lo, it glows with peace and joy.

When the sun of bliss is beaming light and love upon my way,
from the cross the radiance streaming adds new luster to the day.

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Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.
Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Let us pray.

Collect for Last Epiphany

O God, who before the passion of our only-begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading – Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 2

Second Reading – 2 Peter 1:16-21

Hymn 671 – Amazing Grace, stanzas 1-3

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught me heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

The Lord has promised good to me, his word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

Gospel – Matthew 17:1-9

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to*Glory to you, Lord Christ*
The Gospel of the Lord.*Praise to you, Lord Christ.*

Sermon

Nicene Creed – page 358

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again In accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Prayers of the People Form IV – page 388

Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth,
live together in you love, and reveal your glory in the world.

Lord, in you mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.

Lord, in you mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

We commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Confession and Absolution – page 360

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;*

*that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. *Amen.*

The Peace – page 360

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Announcements and Prepare the Altar

Eucharistic Prayer – page 361

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.
We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.
It is right to give him thanks and praise

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:
Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him.

Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever.
Amen.

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Breaking of the Bread

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.
Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Communion

Post Communion Prayer – BCP page 365

Eternal God, heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.

Hymn 530 – Spread, O spread, thou mighty word

Spread, O spread, thou mighty word, spread the kingdom of the Lord.
that to earth's remotest bound all may heed the joyful sound;

Word of how the Father's will made the world, and keeps it, still;
how his only Son he gave, earth from sin and death to save;

Word of how the Savior's love earth's sore burden doth remove;
how forever, in its need, through his death the world is freed;

Word of how the Spirit came bringing peace in Jesus' name;
how his never failing love guides us on to heaven above.

Word of life, most pure and strong, word for which the nations long,
spread abroad, until from night all the world awakes to light.

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for Last Epiphany – February 19, 2023

Collect: O God, who before the passion of your only- begotten Son revealed his glory upon the holy mountain: Grant to us that we, beholding by faith the light of his countenance, may be strengthened to bear our cross, and be changed into his likeness from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go them.” Then Moses went up on the mountain and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 2

Why are the nations in an uproar?

Why do the people mutter empty threats?

Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt and the princes plot together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed?

“Let us break their yoke,” they say;

“let us cast off their bonds from us.”

He whose throne is in heaven is laughing;
the Lord has them in derision.

Then he speaks to them in his wrath,
and his rage fills them with terror.

“I myself have set my king
upon my holy hill of Zion.”

Let me announce the decree of the Lord:

he said to me, “You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.

Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance
and the ends of the earth for your possession.

You shall crush them with an iron rod
and shatter them like piece of pottery.”

And now you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.

Submit to the Lord with fear,
and with trembling bow before him;

Lest he be angry and you perish;
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Happy are they all
who take refuge in him!

Second Reading: 2 Peter 1:16-21

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Matthew 17:1-9

Six days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, 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."

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*