



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, February 6, 2005
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

*Festal Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

on
Matthew 17:1-9

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LIFE AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAIN

Jesus took with him Peter, James and John his brother and led them up a high mountain apart.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

My wife Nancy is a great walker. Eight years ago she walked the Cotswold Way in England (125 miles), which was a warm-up for three pilgrimages, each over 500 miles, in connection with the Way of Saint James, or the Camino Santiago de Compostela – first across the top of Spain in 2000; then across the bottom of France in 2002; finally, this past fall, along the Spanish- Portuguese border. We will announce a presentation and supper this Lent when she will speak on this latest pilgrimage, from Seville to Santiago. One of my nicknames for Nancy is Peregrina, Latin feminine for pilgrim.

Included in Peregrina's treks have been mountains, most recently the Pyrenees. She also climbed Ben Nevis in Scotland, which had fourteen feet of snow on the top in May. I haven't climbed a mountain since Nancy and I and our priest/landlord/friend in Oxford stood together on the top of Helvelyn in England's Lake District over thirty years ago. So in preparation for this sermon, which is about the Transfiguration of Jesus on a high mountaintop shortly before his Passion, I asked Peregrina herself what she thinks is special about climbing to the top of a mountain. She's away this weekend, so I took notes before she left.

She said: "When you get to the top, if you turn around and look back, you can see where you've been; and at the same time you can see where you're going, which you don't normally get to do in the present moment where you're standing. Also – although it's exhausting to climb to the top of the mountain – it's actually more painful and often more dangerous going down."

As a priest I would add that you're far above the noise and clamor of normal life when you're on top of a mountain. You're closer to the heavens; in a sense, closer to Heaven. One thinks of Mount Olympus or, more to the point, Mount Sinai (where Moses and Elijah talked with God) in this vein. The Evangelists don't give us the name of the Mountain of the Transfiguration of Jesus, but the biblical scholars usually nominate Mount Tabor (which is about the height of East Rock overlooking New Haven) or mighty Mount Hermon on the Lebanon-Israel border, which is more like Ben Nevis.

So mountain tops provide unusually clear perspective (you can see where you've been and where you're going); they seem to be near the boundary between heaven and earth; and they are attained at the cost of strenuous work and risk.

The Transfiguration occurred six days after Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ and Jesus responded by saying that his destiny was to suffer, be rejected by the authorities, killed, and on the third day, to rise from the dead. Jesus added that his disciples would have to take up their own “crosses” to follow him. After the Transfiguration, down on the ground in Galilee, Jesus repeated his prediction of his Passion and headed for Jerusalem. (Mt 17:22ff)

Here is what Saint Matthew tells us happened up on the mountain, with Peter, James and John as Jesus’ witnesses: 1) Jesus was transfigured before them, with his face shining like the sun and his garments white as light; 2) Moses and Elijah appeared and talked with Jesus; 3) While Peter suggested that he make three booths for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” 4) Peter, James and John fell on their faces with awe, but Jesus came to them, touched them, and said, “Rise and have no fear,” and when they opened their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus. 5) During their descent, Jesus commanded them to tell the vision to no one “until the Son of man is raised from the dead.”

The perspective on the mountain of the Transfiguration is not only of space but of time. It is Jesus’ life’s perspective. The voice from the cloud recalls the voice at Jesus’ baptism by John at the start of his ministry. The command by Jesus on the way down can be fulfilled only after his death and resurrection. Both before and after the Transfiguration, Jesus asserts that the Christ, the Son of man and Son of the living God, must suffer, be rejected, and die. And at the very midst of all this is a great epiphany, a manifestation of Christ’s glory, an epiphany given to reassure and strengthen the faith of Jesus’ disciples. The Son of man and Suffering Servant is, as we will confess in the creed, none other than God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.

The Collect of the Day, which sets the tone for today’s liturgy, commemorates Jesus’ Transfiguration and then prays 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.” This means that the mountaintop perspective on Jesus’ life is also a perspective on our lives as disciples of Jesus.

In our liturgical Calendar, we stand somewhere between the Baptism of Jesus and Easter. The Transfiguration is a midpoint milestone in Jesus’ ministry, looking both back and ahead, revealing the glory which he had with his Father before the foundation of the world and in which he will rise and ascend after his passion, death and burial. Jesus’ Transfiguration balanced off his passion predictions and his calls to follow him in sufferings; and it confirmed and underlined Peter’s confession that he is indeed the Christ, the Son of the living God. (Mt 16:13ff) The memory of the light and glory on the mountaintop helped the disciples survive and endure the darkness that would come.

Lent is an opportunity to remember that we walk in God’s sight; to walk with Christ on his road to the cross; to behold the glory of his person; to gain strength to bear our own cross; and, in so doing, to change – or, more truly, to be changed with and in Christ from one degree of grace to another, i.e., “from glory to glory.”

Let me leave you with three things to do in the coming holy season. *First, take some time to pray and to read* (for example, the recommended books for Lent in the leaflet). You might find the space and time to do this by fasting or abstaining from something that absorbs perhaps too much of you – like watching television or spending time on the phone or in front of the computer; or, yes, wining and dining. *Second, take stock.* Make a moral or spiritual inventory of your life these days and write it down. Pray over it; if you need some help, consider coming to a priest of the Church. *Third, love and give.* Offer yourself in kindness to another person. Give alms; be reconciled to someone with whom you’re at variance; eschew gossip and in its place work on the habit of speaking the truth in love. These are small, “foot of the mountain” details. But they are connected to what happened on the mountaintop. They connect the way of the cross we must walk to the glory of God we have seen.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.