



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, February 23, 2020
The Last Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Alison J. Turner,
Associate for Children and Family Ministry

on
Exodus 24:12-18, 2 Peter 1:16-21, and Matthew 17:1-9

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Climb Every Mountain

Last summer, I was staying high up in the hills in Austria and the views were, quite simply, spectacular. The air was fresh and clear, and the morning sun gleamed on the white washed walls of the houses, bright red geraniums bloomed in neat wooden boxes which framed the windows. One morning, as I awoke from my dream-like state, it was as if the very hills were alive with the sound of music; music filled my room – quite literally so, because Fr. Turner had decided to play the soundtrack from the movie “The Sound of Music!” This long-awaited experience to awake in the land of Mozart, with music that lifts up our souls, as we hear in today’s mass setting, was perfected as the day unfolded with sights and sounds that I had longed to see and hear since my childhood.

Salzburg was simply wonderful, beyond my imagination. However, to my dismay I was soon to discover that scenes engrained on my early memory, of the singing novice and the Von Trapp family climbing the mountain to safety were, in-part, based on inaccurate cinematic portrayals, rather than facts surrounding nations in a time of conflict and family oppression. Stories of these glorious yet fake technicolor scenes had the potential to ruin my erstwhile illusion. I had a choice: I could cling to my shallow fairy tale or could let go of my limited expectations and, instead, embrace and experience something more challenging; the reality that the music was only powerful because of the terrible reality of Nazi terror.

For some of us, our faith or a period of discernment, is like ascending into the clouds or up a mountain into which we carry many expectations, some real and others an illusion. Such a journey can be filled with trepidation, fear, loneliness and fellowship, excitement, anticipation, and wonder all rolled into one.

Three of our gospels speak of the disciples’ ascent with Jesus to the mountain of Transfiguration. We don’t know what they physically took with them on this momentous ascent, or what they expected of this time with their Lord. Yet we can gather from Matthew’s account, which have just heard proclaimed here at Saint Thomas, that the disciples Peter, James, and John carried unresolved questions and an unquantifiable burden in their hearts. In the verses immediately prior to today’s gospel reading we are told that just six days before their ascent they had been summoned with the call to take up their cross in order to follow him, and challenged with words that if they wished to save their life they must be prepared to lose it. The experience of the glory of Jesus on the Mountain of Transfiguration, is also preceded by the harrowing prediction that their Lord, their Savior, their Master and friend was going to die.

If you have ever received similar news, that a loved one is about to die, feelings of anxiety soar and the bonds of attachment run deep. In a similar way, perhaps the disciples, too, wanted to cling to Jesus, to watch his every move – fueled by anxiety. Maybe this influenced their impulsive reaction to want to build tents for Elijah and Moses, as if to cling or capture the moment or fossilize a memory with them and their beloved Savior; to keep him close and all to themselves, basking in the holiness and brightness shining from the face of Jesus – the antithesis of the prediction of his passion and death. And yet, here on this mountain, the disciples are compelled to let go of their joyful vision of their forefathers, in order for it to be superseded by a far more glorious revelation and personal transformation. As Christ was transfigured, they heard an echo of an earlier epiphany of Christ's purpose, an echo of his baptism in the River Jordan, of the voice proclaiming the Beloved son in whom God was well pleased and to whom they should listen. And, soon would come the ascent to other mountains where Christ's glory would be made manifest – the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane, and Golgotha where there would be no bright cloud but darkness over the whole land.

Archbishop Michael Ramsey often reflected on the radical nature of this gospel of transfiguration honoring multiple Christian experiences over the centuries which have witnessed to Christ's transformation of knowledge, the world and the challenge of pain in all its forms

"When our Lord went up to be transfigured, Jesus carried with him every conflict, every burden, both of the days behind and the days ahead, to be transfigured with him. So when we go apart to be with Jesus in his glory, it is so that our frustrations, our pains, and our cares may be carried into that supernatural context which makes all the difference to them. These frustrations are not forgotten; they are not abolished; they can still be painful. But they become transfigured in the presence of Jesus, our crucified and glorious Lord. And when we have carried our frustrations up to our Lord in his glory, we find in the days which follow that he so generously brings his glory right down into the midst of our frustrations, saying: 'My peace I give unto you.'" ¹

On this last Sunday after the Epiphany which is also the Sunday next before Lent, we are invited into a journey to rediscover wonder, glory and holiness, to capture the experience of something new, to bring our frustrations, anxieties, and fears, so that our narrative can be challenged, our lives empowered, and transformed like those first disciples, not in search of an empty fairy tale but for the mission into which they were, and we are called.

May this day of Transfiguration inspire us as we prepare to walk our Lenten path **together**.

May we trust, **together**, that there will be other glimpses of his glory along the way: In the stillness of adoration of the blessed sacrament, maybe as we walk the Way of the Cross, or witness the majesty of Palm Sunday, or as we wait, as it were, in the garden at the altar of Repose on Maundy Thursday. And, as we approach Cross of Good Friday afresh this year, **together**, may we too glimpse Christ's glory there in the darkness. In anticipation of the full light of Easter, and our own call to transformation in the words of Charles Wesley ²

"...changed from glory into glory
'til in heaven we take our place
'til we cast our crowns before thee
lost in wonder, love and praise."

¹ From "Glory Descending – Michael Ramsey and his writings" p. 66

² On 2 Corinthians 3:18