

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist  
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany – February 7, 2016

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“Peaks and Valleys - Reprise”

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Scripture: Luke 9:28-36; Last Epiphany C – RCL

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I wonder what it was like the day that Jesus led Peter and James and John up on the high mountain. I imagine it was a clear day, warm and dry. The walk to the summit was probably long, but not too uncomfortable. I imagine the men expected to be going out to give Jesus company as he sought a private place to pray. But I doubt they had any idea whatsoever of the experience which awaited them when they arrived. Luke tells us that Jesus was changed right before their very eyes, transfigured into something different than he was before. That his face was changed and his clothes became dazzling white. That other men appeared to him there, men long dead to this world: Moses and the prophet Elijah. And that a cloud covered the mountain top and the voice of God boomed out of the cloud: This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!

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The first time I crested the summit of a mountain, I heard no voices. I did not see God, nor did I see any ancient peoples like Moses or Elijah. It wasn't particularly

bright; the sun was obscured from view by an overcast sort of day. But it was magnificent nonetheless! I remember that I could see below me the whole world stretched out for miles and miles. And it all seemed so surreal. It was so quiet and calm there on the mountain top. Just a comfortable breeze and the rustling of the trees and bushes. And I remember thinking that from up there, it was easier to comprehend God. Somehow everything seemed more majestic, more holy than anything I had ever experienced before, and I couldn't get enough of the peaceful beauty of the world from atop this heavenly seat. And I learned then that I loved the mountains, and I go back now as often as I possibly can.

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By why go back at all? Why not just stay there on the mountain? Peter didn't want to come down from his mountain. He wanted to build places to stay, shelters where he and his friends and Jesus and Moses and Elijah could just kick back and enjoy their bliss forever. Peter wanted to remain on the mountain top, because there he had experienced his dream of being entirely in the presence of the Holy. Life couldn't get any better, so he thought. And he wanted to stay and live there in peace.

Yet despite the fact that Peter wanted to set up a little hotel and just live on there in the presence of the Holy, they all came down the mountain again, a little perplexed maybe, not entirely satisfied perhaps, not entirely certain of what they saw

behind the dazzling white light and the cloudy sky. But life was different after that day. And some day, that experience on the mountaintop would lead these men to give their entire lives for the sake of Christ and the church.

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But why does God do that? Why does God let us ascend to the mountain top only to call us down to the valleys once again? Why are there times in our lives when we experience life so richly, so marvelously, and so perfectly only to have those times taken from our grasp and replaced with the struggles and the illnesses and the responsibilities and questions that comprise everyday life? I cannot in truth say that I know the answer, but I do have an idea...

I don't want us to think this morning that this story is all about Jesus. I know we always give him top billing, and he gets that cool experience of talking to Moses and Elijah, come back from the dead for a little chat. And Jesus gets the excellent makeup team and the dazzling white wardrobe. But the story isn't about Jesus. You heard the voice, right? You heard it. "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" Those words... are for us. This is a story about us, and what happens to us, because we have heard this call to listen to the words of Jesus. We may not feel so different, but right now, we are right in the middle of an experience of the holy. We are being transfigured.

Maybe we are in no less a process of transfiguration than that which Jesus experienced that day on the mountain top so long ago. But for us who are really like curious but inexperienced children in this great Creation of the God of the Universe, our transfiguration is being accomplished, not in the blink of an eye like Jesus', but in the ordinary experiences of daily living, in the challenges and the ups and downs, in the vulnerability which comes with being human. Who among us can say that our struggles do not alter us as much as our joys? That our pains as well as our pleasures do not shape us? That to experience difficulty in life does not serve, at times, to make us wiser than we were before?

One reason I believe I was so struck with the majesty of the mountains is because for the first fifteen years of my life, I had never encountered such majestic and awesome natural beauty as I saw on that first day I saw a mountain. My feeling about the mountains was heightened, because I knew first the flat lands of Florida where I grew up.

Could it be that the life of holiness on this earth is this way? That the life of the Christian is a life of ups and downs, periods of great faith followed by periods of grave doubt? Times of intimate relationship with God followed by times when God doesn't seem present at all? Days when things go well with us and with our souls, and days when we are not healthy and happiness seems fleeting? Perhaps our

transfigurations are being accomplished through learning that the glorious mountain top experiences we so long for make little sense without the experiences of the valleys. But in either place, though we realize it or not, God is there accomplishing our transfigurations.