

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
Transfiguration Sunday, March 2, 2014**

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Texts: Exodus 24: 12-18 & Matthew 17: 1-9**

At first glance, it might have looked like an ordinary day out for four friends – a walk into the countryside, a hike on the mountain, companionship and chilling out. For once, the crowds had receded. Even the rest of the inner circle had something else to do, so Jesus, Peter, James, and John set off for a mountain. Mount Tabor, perhaps. Or Mount Hermon. A peak of less than 2,000 feet or one nearly 8,000. We don't really know. It probably doesn't matter.

Why a mountain that day? Whatever path they were on, wherever they had been staying in the days since Caesarea Philippi, they would need to walk a fair distance to a mountain. There were none that they had to climb in order to get to another destination. In fact, if Matthew's sequence is right, Caesarea Philippi to the north to Capernaum next to the Sea of Galilee, either mountain was out of the way.

I find myself wondering about the minutiae in that mountain climb. It couldn't have been easy. Today, there would be chair lifts or funiculars or, for outdoor people, broken-in hiking boots, back packs, water bottles and gear. Not just sandals. When I visited Mount Tabor, the smaller of the mountains, the buses couldn't go up. Not even the small 18 passenger van we had. It was Mercedes stretch limo cabs that carried us around the hairpin curves to the Church of the Transfiguration at its top – on the spot that has (rightly or wrongly) been considered the traditional site of the transfiguration since about the 4th century.

Maybe this fixation on ordinary details is my way of deflecting the mysterious, supernatural, hard-to-believe nature of the rest of this story. Like Peter did, looking for a practical solution, suggesting that tents be built up there on the mountain top.

But, I'm getting ahead of the story. Six days before, following debates and testing by the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus tried to teach his closest disciples. This was the time that he asked them the big questions, "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do *you* say that I am?" Answers included the prophet Elijah

who was expected to return to bring in God's reign. Peter, though, was affirmed when he identified him as the Messiah. Then followed the difficult teachings about the coming days of Jesus' suffering, rejection, and death.

And now, the four men reach the mountain top. Mountains have been significant since long before the people of Israel set out from Egypt. These high places, these peaks sometimes enveloped in clouds, were places of mystery – closer to God in the two-or three level universe they inhabited. So, this was where significant encounters between the human and the divine happened. We have one of most significant in today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures: Moses' call to Mount Sinai, his 40 days and nights within that fiery cloud receiving the commandments from YHWH.

And here for Peter, James, and John are all of the symbols: the appearance of Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest figures in all of Israel's faith, the change of Jesus' clothing to brilliant white, and his face dazzling just like that of Moses so many centuries earlier. Then the over shadowing cloud, and the voice from on high – the same voice, virtually the same words heard at Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." Indeed it was a mystical moment, a theophany.

And being overwhelmed, Peter reverts to what he knows how to do – build some tents for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Preserve this transcendent moment. Stay there in the experience.

But that cannot be. What happens in those mountaintop experiences is meant to change those involved – forever. Not just while remaining in the high place but back down in the valley, too. It wasn't just Jesus who was transfigured. It was all of them. The Greek word is "metamorphosis." This change cannot be left behind.

Stories like this can take us out of our comfort zones just as it did for these disciples. And, though we probably don't see such dramatically clear and powerful visions in our own lives, we may well have mountaintop experiences. The dramatic ones might well be easier! Sometimes we, as individuals or as a church, feel strange stirrings or nudges that we don't understand. Just when we get our lives settled in a nice, tidy plan, the nudge – or kick in the pants – comes. We rant and rave. Deny, say "no." Try to hide. Usually to no avail.

Remember Jonah rowing as hard and as fast as he ran *away* from where God is sending him? How did that work for him?

A story. I wasn't going to tell it, because, if we're lucky you'll have a chance to hear it from the one whose story it is to tell. But I'll give a thumb nail—I mentioned it in the current e-Blast. Marsha and I heard it at the Rockford Deanery meeting last week. Lou Ness, an Episcopal Deacon in charge of Rockford's Shelter Care organization is taking a walk in April. She has had an exceedingly difficult year with attempts to provide housing and other services due to financial cut backs and projects falling through. On her way back from a meeting in Chicago a while ago, she made the decision to give it all up. It was just too much. She prayed there in her car. And after a bit, she heard a voice. It said, "Lou, walk to Washington, D.C."

She tried to refuse. She sought help from friends she just knew would advise her to stay home. After all, she is not young. And she has a chronic autoimmune disease that requires regular attention. But every last one betrayed her. They all said, "Lou, you should do this." So, she has been training. And she has been discerning what this all means—but only to a point. Much is unknown. She is intentionally staying away from the planning and leaving it to others. All that is for sure is that she will step off from Rockford by 9 am on April 1, carrying stories from those who have struggled to get needed services and those who have tried on their behalf. She will put one foot in front of the other and hope to reach D.C. by mid-May. It's called trust. Radical trust.

This day, Transfiguration Sunday, brings to an end the season of light, Epiphany, where God is revealed—made known to us—in Jesus and his ministry. Epiphany ends with this one last magnificent burst of light, preparing us to put away our "alleluias" and enter the Lenten journey, walking the path with Jesus to Jerusalem and the shadows that follow. Maybe we would rather avoid that. Maybe we would rather jump right over Lent to the alleluias of the Resurrection. But, no. We have seen the Glory of God. This is a time to be quiet, to let the light of our own mountaintop experiences grow in us by taking time in prayer, in communion with God. To listen. To grow. For the Glory of God will overcome the shadows—in Jesus' resurrection and in the promise to us of life with God. Forever.

Amen.