

**Feast of the Transfiguration | Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year C
First Sunday at St. Paul & the Redeemer | The Rev. Catherine Healy**

May I speak in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning!

I am so excited to be here with all of you at last. For those I haven't yet met, my name is Catherine Healy, and I am your new rector.

Along with my family, I've spent the last several months getting more and more excited for this, our first Sunday with you. And now that the day has come, a new chapter in our common life begins.

I am looking forward to getting to know all of you and doing God's work together. Part of that work is worshiping in this beautiful space, singing with this incredible choir, and wrestling with the Scriptures in efforts to better understand the mind and heart of God. There are so many different ways to read the Bible, but for me they all begin with the central question of Godly Play: "I wonder."

I wonder why Jesus only took three of his apostles with him to pray.

I wonder what he talked about with Moses and Elijah.

I wonder why Luke, in telling this Gospel story, casually passes over the part where at the beginning of it they CLIMB A MOUNTAIN.

Have you ever climbed a mountain? It is not a single-verse kind of endeavor.

I love to hike, and I have been up a few mountains. Sometimes leading the way, but more often dragging along at the end of the pack, gasping for air, wondering if I'm ever going to catch up.

Every mountain I've ever climbed has seemed like a really good idea for about the first ten minutes of the hike. That's about the point when I start wondering if it's too late to turn back.

I wonder if Peter and James and John ever felt the same.

But even when my lungs are burning and I feel like I can't take another step, I know that if I can just push myself to keep going, a little longer, and a little longer, eventually I'll make it to the top.

And oh my gosh, the view.

Today we hear the Gospel story that is called the Transfiguration of Christ, where God names Jesus as the chosen one. Those three apostles are witnesses to something amazing.

But if this story has any relevance to our own lives of faith, I think it is important that we not forget the long, hard slog up the mountain.

Maybe you have been through something similar to this. You are seeking after some kind of transcendence. You start out on the path to find it. You meet Jesus, and he becomes your guide.

Maybe you take advantage of times like the season of Lent to lighten your pack. Because what is the practice of giving something up for Lent, except a way to jettison a few things you are carrying that make it harder for you to move toward closeness with God?

But the path is rockier than you expected, and steep. Parts of it are dangerous. There are twists and turns that take you in the wrong direction, and you have no idea if Jesus is still with you because you sure can't see him anymore.

And you are tired. So tired.

And there is every reason to turn back.

This is all part of a *normal* life of faith.

Not unlike climbing a normal mountain.

But if you can keep going, if you get that moment at the top—

Oh my gosh, the view.

When the apostles get to the top of the mountain with Jesus, we don't need to wonder whether they're tired. Luke tells us that they were "weighed down with sleep."

But they keep on going, and because they stay awake, they get to see Jesus in his glory.

Jesus is already the Son of God. He is already glorious.

The Transfiguration doesn't happen *for* Jesus.

It happens for his friends.

They have one beautiful, terrifying moment where their doubts and fears fade away and they can finally see Jesus for who he is, in all his glory.

Beautiful, because they are having a profound experience of the living God.

Terrifying, because God is so much more powerful than they imagined.

If we're lucky, in our lives of faith, we too get these occasional mountaintop moments. Sometimes in church, or at prayer; sometimes in a totally unexpected place. Usually after a long, hard climb.

But on that mountaintop, you know God is with you; the veil falls away; suddenly nothing else seems to matter.

That's how it makes Peter feel. He wants to stay.

"'Master, it is good for us to be here.' Let's just make three dwellings and stay up here forever."

He has seen the transfigured Christ, face to face. You can't blame him for not wanting to go back to his ordinary life after that.

I wonder if he was disappointed when Jesus led them back down the mountain.

But down they go, to the waiting crowds. And not a moment too soon—the first thing Jesus does is heal a child.

This, too, I think, is part of Jesus' message to the apostles—and, by extension, to us.

Especially as we prepare to enter into Lent, and consider giving things up or taking things on, it's easy to focus on that mountaintop moment as the final goal.

But what Jesus showed the apostles is that the transcendent experience of God is not the *end*, it's the *means*.

We put all that effort into worship and prayer and struggling with our faith so that we can be transformed by our encounter with God—but God puts all that effort into our transformation so that we will go back down the mountain and take up God's work of healing the world.

Feeling God's presence in our lives can change us. It can empower us to go into hard places. It can protect us from burnout and despair.

It can give us the courage to face down demons—our own, or someone else's.

Ash Wednesday is coming this week, and with it the invitation to spend forty days journeying into the wilderness with Jesus.

As you prepare your heart and mind, it may be worth thinking about the terrain of your mountain.

Where are you on that journey of faith right now? Are you at a cliff's edge or a steep place? Do you need to call in a little help from the others who are walking the road with you?

Or are you within view of the mountaintop? How will you know when you get there?

And, most importantly, what is the work for which God is equipping and empowering you?

May the God who has given us the will to do these things give us the grace and power to perform them.

Amen.