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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Transfiguration of our Lord, Year A
2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

We all have mountains to climb at one time or another. I spoke with a parent recently whose mountain is their adult child's addiction.

For some, grief is a mountain whose summit never seems to be reached. They just keep trudging a winding path, never knowing when they will get above the clouds.

For others, the mountain is finishing their education, or working toward a new fitness goal.

Climbing to the top of a mountain is hard work, whether it is a goal to be achieved or a difficulty to be overcome.

Jesus knows all about the mountains of this human life. In Matthew's gospel he faces four of them. And each time we journey to those mountaintops with him, we experience a glimpse of his eternal majesty. The view from Jesus' mountain peaks helps us to gaze toward God's eternal promises for humanity and all creation.

We'll talk about those four mountaintops in a minute. But first I want to point out our second reading today. It appears that the writer of 2 Peter could be the same Simon Peter who was on the mountain with Jesus on the day of the Transfiguration. But it is widely understood that this letter was actually written after the death of that Peter and someone else has written in his name.

In the time of the early church it was a common practice to write in the name of someone else which was done to give authority to the writing rather than credit to the writer. So, this mystery writer gives witness to the Transfiguration event as if he (or she!) had actually been there!

This, too, was a common practice, especially in the Jewish tradition. For example, at the celebration of the Passover Seder meal, Jewish families retell the story of the Exodus in first person. The script for the Seder meal is called the Haggadah, and it says, "In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt."

The writer of 2 Peter tells of Jesus' majesty on that mountain and how that event has become part of their witness of faith to others. As we read about the Transfiguration and the other mountaintop experiences of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, we are also called to witness them so that we can GIVE WITNESS to others about Jesus.

For the writer of 2 Peter, the Transfiguration was a critical moment in Jesus' life that connected with the writer's life. As we hear and read the Bible, we are meant to place ourselves in Jesus' presence. We can wonder and struggle with these stories, even while we find ourselves standing with Peter, James, and John or any of the others who lived and followed Jesus then.

So, let's see if any of Jesus' mountaintop experiences open our eyes to seeing Jesus, ourselves, and the glory of God's eternal power in new ways.

Jesus' first mountaintop experience will be the gospel reading next Sunday. It comes just after Jesus is baptized and the Spirit leads him into the wilderness "to be tempted by the devil." One of those temptations—or tests—has Satan taking Jesus up to the top of a mountain and looking over all the kingdoms of the world.

Satan says to Jesus, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Jesus responds, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

On that mountaintop Jesus can see the kingdoms humanity has built. We are often tempted to place our trust in human power and structures, too. Even as we are called in other parts of Scripture to support and pray for the leaders among us, this is not where we place our hope and trust. Jesus made it very clear to Satan, the Deceiver, that as he sets out to do the work God has sent him to do, he places his trust in God—the One who is our past, our present, and our future.

The second mountaintop passage in Matthew's gospel is one we have just spent several weeks with—the Sermon on the Mount. After Jesus called his first few disciples from their fishing boats and began to travel, teaching and healing along the way, he stepped away with the disciples to teach them.

Jesus said that in the kingdom of heaven those who are now poor in spirit, meek, and mourning would be lifted up. The citizens of that kingdom would be people of mercy and peace, whose hearts are set solely on God's purposes.

He also taught the fullness of God's commandments, and declared his followers to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. On this mountain, we are given a vision of God's intended and promised future, in which those who believe in and follow Jesus Christ shine the light of God's blessing and goodness to all the world.

Today's gospel reading tells of Jesus' third mountaintop event. With Peter and James and John we witness the revealing of Jesus' divine nature. Even though Peter has just testified in chapter 16 that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, he is still struck down with awe and wonder when he sees Jesus transfigured and shining!

Some expressions of the Christian church make people feel compelled to have dramatic encounters with Christ. And sometimes that happens in visions or dreams or near-death experiences. I have been inspired by these kinds of stories, and I also know that they are rare and we don't need to feel like our faith is incomplete if we haven't seen this kind of thing for ourselves.

Like the writer of 2 Peter, we can be in the presence of Christ's divine majesty in the hearing and telling of his Transfiguration. This glimpse of the glory of God on this mountaintop is as much our experience to give witness to as those who were actually there.

Jesus' final mountaintop experience is where we are headed in the upcoming season of Lent. On a hill outside of Jerusalem, Jesus was lifted up on a cross. On this mountain, we see our God who suffers with us in order to save and redeem us.

Often, we talk about mountaintop experiences as celebrations! It may seem that Jesus in the wilderness with Satan was not so wonderful. The cross can be a difficult story to tell.

But all of these mountaintop events in Jesus' life show us our Emmanuel, God with us...

- standing up to the tests and temptations of the world,
- painting a picture of a new world based on peace and harmony,
- drawing us away from our everyday distractions to shine the light of God's glory and majesty around us,
- and going to the dark and lonely places to suffer with us and for us—all so that we would see God's love in the flesh.

Whatever mountains we are facing today—the challenges we have chosen, and those that have seemingly chosen us—God is with us in both amazing and tangible ways.

Fred Rogers can help us remember that with these words:

“In the external scheme of things, shining moments are as brief as the twinkling of an eye, yet such twinklings are what eternity is made of—moments when we human beings can say ‘I love you,’ ‘I’m proud of you,’ ‘I’m grateful for you.’ That’s what eternity is made of: invisible, imperishable, *good stuff*.”

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Trusting that God hears us, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

A brief silence.

Holy God, your loving power is at work among us. Rouse and embolden your church, that we too might be transfigured, set alight in the world for the sake of the gospel. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Awesome God, you speak and the earth trembles. You display your majesty in the mountains and your mystery in the clouds. Grant that we discover your magnificence in all of your created world. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Ruler of nations, your reign extends across all human borders. Guide world leaders in justice and righteousness, that they may work for equity for all people and protect the world that you have made. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Gracious God, you are a refuge for all who are neglected and abused. Bring freedom to those who are oppressed and give comfort to those experiencing pain of any kind especially...

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of Moses and Elijah, you made your dwelling place at the top of a mountain with Jesus and his disciples. Dwell also in this congregation, that all who enter this community might be transformed by your dazzling brilliance, and empowered to bear witness to the salvation we have from you.

Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Everlasting God, you offer eternal life to all your children. Thank you for the witness of those who lived and died in the faith, especially our sister Delores Peck. May we trust in your endless mercy and grace. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Confident that you are able to accomplish more than we even dare to ask, we bring these prayers before you, believing in your saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**