

“Lessons for a Mountain Trail”
A sermon preached
by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Transfiguration Sunday / March 3, 2019
[Luke 9:28-36, \[37-43a\]](#)

When you climb a mountain,
the view you get can be stunning.
The mountain breezes blow clean, fresh.

When I lived in congested,
sometimes smoggy southern California,
I loved camping trips with my Boy Scout troop.
I still recall trekking up the Sierra Nevada or San
Gabriel mountains. The air felt thinner, so the
edges and outlines of the craggy rocks seemed
sharper. The world seemed bigger.

Mountains have spiritual significance, too.
Lots of important things happen on mountains in
Scripture, like God giving the Ten
Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. And
Moses, as we heard from our first reading, came

down from the mountain with his face glowing
from his time there in God's presence.

Jesus gave his most famous teaching, the Sermon
on the Mount, from an elevated spot.

And this week, this Wednesday, we enter Lent,
the season that points us to Jesus dying, a raised
place, on a hill named Golgotha outside
Jerusalem.

But first, in today's reading, Jesus invites just
three of his followers to trek up a mountain.

This was no typical camping trip.

The Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke
don't care about location as
much as the elevation.

It's not the placement on a map that matters
but the intensified encounter. We learn of a
meeting place saturated with holy presence.

I love mountain views. But however impressive
rarefied air and great panoramas are, it's the

dazzling light of Jesus's garments, it's his shining face in this story that is even more startling.

What really matters is how the disciples find their souls rocked and their hearts shaken awake.

On this mountain, the disciples witness something profound, they discover something more about what it means to be a follower of Christ.

They went up to pray, Luke tells us, and “while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” A cloud comes with a holy hush, and a voice that speaks out of it and mentions Jesus.

The dazzling light renders them blinking and caught off guard and a little confused. They saw and heard what eyes and ears can scarcely take in.

That's how amazing it was.

You'd think the glory would make them be awestruck and quiet. You'd think it would still

Peter's chatter and tendency
to pipe up and overshare.

But Peter seems more eager to do something—
anything—than to just stand still and watch.
He gets fidgety. He wants to bear down get busy,
not open up and listen.

But spiritual growth requires times we are not
doing, not producing, not achieving.
You know that saying you heard from your mom
or dad: Don't just sit there, do something?
The whole scene in Luke says, in effect,
Don't just do something. *Stand there.*
Stop to listen long enough so you know what you
are to be busy about. Watch. Pay attention!
There's a lot to take in.

That's one key to spiritual growth, such special
moments of encounter—
and our openness to them.

I've heard sermons, *preached* sermons that touch
for a moment on the staggering glory of this
encounter and then quickly, too quickly, say,

Well, you can't stay on the mountain forever.

True, but we can also go too soon.

In our get-it-done world, this scene helps us resist

the temptation always to be doing, moving.

So, why not linger, why *not* bask in the reflected

glory of the Son of God?

That's essential to spiritual growth.

And remember where they were all headed:

to the cross. To a journey of suffering,

all of them, but especially Jesus,

and they would need every ounce of spiritual

sustenance they could get.

I want to say, lest you think this is only a scene

from long ago, or something only of interest

to marathon pray-ers and religious geniuses,

that there's something here for you, too.

For all of us.

Moments like these are possible in *our* growth in faith. One philosopher speaks of how we carry on

with an “abiding amazement that lies just below
the surface of conscious thought.”

That awareness erupts some days.

We are caught off guard by wonder,
made aware of a Presence.

And we can tend to it. Be awake to it.

Not long ago the Gallup organization surveyed
Americans on their spiritual habits and practices.
The survey takers asked: Have you had a sense of
God’s presence in the last 24 hours?

Forty-nine percent, almost half, said yes, they had
had a sense of God’s presence, just within the
span of the last day or so.

Maybe God shows up more than we think.

How about you, in your life?

I’m amazed at how when I talk about our
experiences of the divine in sermons people come
up to me and say almost shyly, “I had it happen to

me ...” Or, “I felt something powerful once while in church or in the woods. Was it real?”

On the other hand, maybe some of us feel spiritually anemic. When it comes to joy and meaning and experience, our days seem on the thin side. Worship can seem dry, wooden, and boring.

But today’s story suggests God’s not stingy with his presence. He deals in extravagances. He draws near in sometimes remarkable ways

For Jesus brings heaven near.

Looking at him, we get glimpses of God’s nearness and radiance. Listening we hear what our hearts long for. Maybe the God of glory we see in today’s Gospel story holds more possibilities for you than you suspect.

If Jesus hangs around the premises here, think of coming as a spiritual expedition.

But I also have a word of guidance, a challenge, really, for how to grow spiritually.

The disciples had some work to do. They had to draw on some determination to make it up the mountain. I can imagine some grunts and groans on that hike up.

I know I got plenty of blisters when we had our Scout camp-outs and mountain hikes.

We had to stop for water, catch our breath.

On the trail, it gets pretty grimy and sweaty.

So, while having your own Epiphany is more possible than you may think, it also may require more of you than you expect.

I wonder why we sometimes expect mountain top glories when we don't do much to ready our hearts. When we don't give much attention to our spiritual growth.

Here's a way to think about our own progress in spiritual matters. How many of you took music lessons? Clarinet, piano, voice?

Your teacher would say, Don't just play when we have a lesson! Practice during the week.

If you don't do the scales and work daily on coordination in your fingers, you won't progress.

Or say football is your thing.

Or tennis. Or golf.

So much so that you hired a personal coach.

He or she would say the same thing about practice. Or maybe you ran track, like I did.

What would happen if I and my teammates showed up only for the competitions but not the practices?

So, when you think about church going, if you show up, and during the week, nothing more is happening, might that not be why you feel like more must be possible?

Sometimes I hear expressed a sentiment that goes something like this: When I come to church I just want to be fed spiritually. Jesus did say blessed are those who hunger and thirst, for they will be filled.

But he said hunger and thirst for *righteousness*.

There is an active quality to righteousness.
He was talking about more than a passive state of
waiting to be fed. Maturing means effort, too.

Which is why I prefer we talk less about being fed
and more about growing in spiritual maturity,
about growing in our faith. Growing, as Paul said,
into maturity, into the full measure of Christ.

As I and your leaders cast a significant vision and
a careful response to our RenewalWorks
inventory you can expect more help with the trail
markers for growing, vital faith.

Some good stuff is in the works.

I want us to encourage one another as we walk
together and stay alert.

Today's story from Luke is filled with
otherworldly glory. It was miraculous.

But, there was some doing
to be done. It took some negotiating of rocky
hillsides and stretches that left them winded.

So, there's an invitation for us here.

Especially this coming week.

Take advantage of Lent this year.

I will be emailing a letter tomorrow with some guidance on how to make your Lenten practices part of your journey to spiritual maturity.

Not just on Sundays, please, but during the week, consider some practices to make you more attentive to Christ's presence, better able to respond to God when he shows up in your life and invites *you* to join him on a mountain.