

Transfiguration A  
February 23, 2020  
2 Peter 1:16-21, Matthew 17:1-9

## **HIGH EXPOSURE**

Transfiguration Sunday serves as a bridge between Epiphany, the season of light, and wilderness journey of Lent.

This Wednesday we'll begin our Lenten sojourn together, but today we linger a moment as we join Peter, James, and John as witnesses of Christ's glory on the Mountain of Transfiguration.

### **Strange and wonderful things can happen on mountaintops.**

Through the years I've had the opportunity to experience some of them.

- On Glacier Peak 100 mph winds threatening to blow our climbing party off the mountain.
- On Bonanza Peak we sat on the summit in complete, sublime stillness.
- Gaping crevasses on Mt. Baker made route finding supremely challenging—we could see our destination clearly, but getting there required a serpentine path.
- On Rainier I once became so disoriented in a white-out that I couldn't tell whether I was walking upslope or down;
- And I've been so sick near the summit that I couldn't imagine how I'd ever get down.

**Mountains are nothing to trifle with.** Each year the death toll on the world's highest peaks ticks upward as novice climbers with plenty of money for guides tempt fate by entering a realm they are ill prepared to deal with.

**Still, there's nothing quite like being high up a mountain on a clear, sunny day.**

**Last Tuesday our family went snow hiking in Gold Creek Valley near Snoqualmie Pass. Seeing those bright peaks along Rampart Ridge up close lightened my soul and activated the impulse to go higher, to gain an eagle-eye view.**

Then, Thursday, on a visit with Helen and Jack, I saw photos Jack took while climbing in the shadow of Everest in the Himalayas. What a treat it was to hear Jack's stories.

The higher you climb on a mountain like Rainier the smaller and less significant the lesser hills and valleys become. When you get above 10,000 feet, your perspective shifts; everything below you begins to flatten out; all the problems you left behind disappear.

Six days before Jesus ascended the mountain with Peter, James and John, he'd started telling them, for the first time, how the route he was on would lead to suffering, rejecting and, finally, execution. **You remember what Peter had to say about that?**

GOD FORBID, LORD! THIS WILL NEVER HAPPEN TO YOU! Peter wanted no part of that scenario.

**When you're choosing a route up a mountain, you're taking a calculated risk. One way mountaineers talk about this risk is in terms of exposure factor.**

The higher the exposure factor the greater the risk. Traversing a route with high exposure means if you—or the person you're roped to—slips, there's a good chance you won't be able to stop the fall.

Legendary Swiss climber Reinhold Messner, the first to climb a number of the world's 8,000+ meter peaks without supplemental oxygen, calls EXPOSURE "what you face in wild nature: the weather, the cold, the oxygen, the storms the avalanches and rock falls, rain and snow."

"Doing a difficult ascent," says Messner, "is a lot about your own fear, and if you are together with another person, or with two people, you can divide that fear, share it. But when you are alone, the fear is all on you...It's very difficult to learn to cope with it," he says, but "you have to learn to cope [with fear], you have to learn it slowly, and in small steps. If you allow it to happen slowly, you will have the time to take the many, many steps you need to get where you want."<sup>1</sup>

**If the climbing route you're on takes you through areas of high exposure, you do everything you can to increase your margin of safety.**

**That being the case, we could say that Peter is just trying to be a safe climber!**

What he wants is the safest, the least exposed route to Jerusalem and to glory.

Why take unnecessary risks? If going to Jerusalem is too dangerous, then take another route.

But Jesus knows what Peter cannot, that bringing healing to the world requires him to take the path of greatest exposure. The risks cannot be avoided, they must be embraced; and the fear that comes with it shared.

The necessity of Jesus taking such a route was beyond Peter's ability to grasp when Jesus first spoke of it. But Peter seems much more comfortable with today's scene, with the dazzling brightness, with Moses and Elijah and the glory of it all!

LORD, he says, IT'S SO GOOD TO BE HERE! HOW ABOUT WE SET UP CAMP AND ENJOY THE VIEW FOR A SPELL!

**I don't know about you, but there's something about Peter's logic that really appeals to me!**

**When the weather's right, there's no more magical place to be than on the mountaintop.**

After all...

- Who wouldn't want to stay up high, where all my problems seem smaller?
- Who wouldn't want to make the special feeling last?
- Who wouldn't want to avoid as long as possible the journey back down—back to the grind, back to the problems, back to troubled relationships at work, school, and home?

Our new church council meets for the first time this Tuesday, and one of the things we'll be taking a close look at is the newly corrected and untangled financial reports from 2019.

It would be great—would it not— if we could continue reveling in the highs we experienced during our 75th anniversary year, to let ourselves ride a little longer on the positive spirit of goals accomplished and projects completed?

It be wonderful if we could avoid the higher exposure routes that lead down from where we ended the year and into the nitty gritty of every day ministry? Right? Of course it would be! At least for a while.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/bkivHAPO8TMRj9fWODkFP/Reinhold-Messner--When-youre-alone-fear-is-all-on-you.html>

Peter didn't really know what he was saying when he offering to set up camp on the mountain's summit. The scene he and the others witnessed of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah left them dazzled and disoriented, which can happen in the mountains.

Maybe they thought they'd reached the summit of their journey with Jesus; that their expedition was over. But after the CLOUD enveloped them, and the VOICE caused their knees to shake; after the light returned to normal and Jesus pointed them all back down the mountain, they found the world below just as they'd left it: full of victims; full of need.

**No, this wasn't the summit after all, this wasn't the end.** There was another leg of the journey before them; the final leg, that would lead them to Jerusalem and another mountain called Golgotha, the hill of the cross.

**Sisters and brothers we, too, have journeys—one's we've been launched on and ones yet to be.**

And there are and will be days when we, like Peter, will find ourselves searching for the least exposed route forward; the safest path with the least risk.

**Sometimes that safer route available to us will be the right one. Sometimes it will not.**

At times the path we find ourselves on will be radically different from what we ever expected. It may cause us pain, or require us to enter into the pain of others.

At times like these those mountain highs we once experienced may seem more distant than ever. But we must never give up hope, or yield to fear or despair.

For no matter what, in those times, the path forward may look like, no matter what challenges it may hold for us—individually or collectively—our Lord promises to walk beside us, step by step, all the way; to help us to pick a path through the hazards and high exposures that lie in our path; to guide us with a presence both strong and tender into being Christ for each other.

As a congregation, we have yoked ourselves to a vision that leads us beyond our own needs and into the world around us. Whatever routes we choose together, let it be our prayer that the Spirit steer us not toward the path of least resistance, but instead down the road of faithful discipleship, so that together we might take hold of the life that truly is life.

And having seized—and been seized by—that life, we might bear that life to all who yearn for God in this place.

Amen.