

The Last Sunday of Epiphany, February 26, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland.  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

Mountaintops! Matthew's fond of them - or, more accurately, "high places." Mount Tabor (the traditional place identified as the Mount of the Transfiguration) – is not that big! Mt. Tabor is 1826 feet above sea level – not what most of us think of when we think "mountain!"

Whenever Matthew wants to record a story about a particularly significant spiritual moment, like an encounter with God, it happens on a "high place." The sermon on the Mount, for instance, echoes Moses' mountain top" encounter with God and the subsequent giving of the Law. "Here is another gift of guidance from God" Matthew's saying, "see it also happened on a mountain!"

So a lightbulb should go on any time you read Matthew talking about "mountains" or "high places." And here we are on what's called the Mount of Transfiguration.

Have you ever been to a "high place?" How about Hurricane Ridge? 5200 feet above sea level. The view is breathtaking! On a clear day from the right place you can see north of Victoria, over to Vancouver, over Whidbey to Everett – amazing!

From Mount Tabor you have a view over much of the Galilee region – over Nazareth, over the Sea of Galilee, and over toward the Mediterranean. Also breathtaking!

I've been up to Hurricane Ridge and to the top of Mount Tabor twice – it never gets old! Most of us rarely get the chance to go up to "High Places" – and when we do they invite us into an experience where silence – ours and our surroundings – is a significant marker of the encounter. The moment that we use words the spell can be broken. Trying, later, to describe the experience somehow devalues it – "word's can't express" is how sentences about the moment often begin, we trail off and end up saying "you had to be there...."

I think to fully comprehend the events Matthew describes today we would have had to have been there!

Peter was there, and I think the breathtaking nature of the experience overwhelmed him; he was surprised, awe-struck, frightened, and it looks like he was at a loss as to how to respond – so he started to babble, he said the first thing that came into his mind – stuff about tents! I think we make a mistake if we focus too quickly on the words Peter uttered: "what did they *mean*?" we ask, the left side of our brains having kicked in. But this isn't a left-brain moment; seeking understanding isn't the best way to respond. Peter's left-brain words have the air of a diversionary tactic.

It's easy to be hard on Peter! But who wouldn't be overwhelmed, in a moment like that? Human encounters with the Sacred, with God are almost always predictably overwhelming. And when we're overwhelmed we often try and find a way out of the moment – we almost *want* to break the spell, because the encounter lays bare our own soul in the same way it did for Peter, reveals the doubts and fears we work so hard to hide from everyone else, and sometimes – often? – from

ourselves. Quick! Change the subject! “How about that weather!” “Let’s put up some tents?!” Of course, to put up some tents you have to look away, you have to look at the ground!

As people of faith, we believe that God is present all the time for us, not just some of the time; and not only in one or another specific place. But it’s hard to open ourselves up to sacred encounters all the time – they’re draining! They’re powerful! They exhaust us.

More than that, for most of us it’s hard to open ourselves up to sacred encounters *anytime*! And *especially* when there can be no mistaking whatsoever that we’re having a sacred encounter!! Whatever language you want to use to describe something that’s actually beyond the ability of language to convey, *there can be no doubt whatsoever* that this High Place Moment described by Matthew was a sacred encounter!

Encounters with the Holy can be fearful but also profoundly transformative. So often we turn away from experiences of transformation because we fear what it will mean for us – will we have to change? Will the world we live in be different? The Voice makes plain not only the reality of the encounter, but a sacred awareness that when our souls are so opened up we will respond in part with fear. In fact every time a messenger from God “speaks” one of the main messages is “do not be afraid.” It’s a central message because when we’re fearful, when we’re afraid, we don’t often allow ourselves to enter into the moment, because encounters with the Holy, with God, challenge us, call us to a different way of living. It takes real effort to embrace the consequences of such an encounter, and much less to engage in denial or avoidance.

In Peter’s case the Voice won’t allow him to distract himself. Notice how that Voice speaks only when Peter starts to waiver? It’s almost as if the purpose is to say “You were right that this is a special moment, but don’t choose to be distracted by things of lesser importance; stay focused, stay in the moment, stay in the ‘now.’”

This is a truly remarkable, mystic encounter. And for at least a moment, as we enter this story, we’re all mystics. We’re ushered into a world in which anything is possible, in which God is alive, and we share somehow in this divinity. It reminds me – perhaps because I’ve been working with Frank and Teresa to prepare four Sundays in the Easter season when we’ll be celebrating a Celtic Eucharist – it reminds me of the Celtic language of “thin places,” places that are translucent to the divine, places where “heaven and earth meet” and God’s grandeur bursts forth in a craggy rock or grove of trees. Both Exodus and Matthew are describing “thin places.”

And so we enter into this “thin place” – a moment of giftedness that, the Voice reminds us, we shouldn’t underestimate, or distract ourselves from, but one we should embrace, not the least because it offers us an alternative to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century consumer world. As one theologian (Bruce Epperly) has said,

“We’ve become so busy about our own affairs that we’ve lost the vision of beauty. We’ve tamped down wonder to consume, prophesy to profit, beauty to buy, and awe to acquire. We focus on the literal word of scripture and deny its wonder; we settle..... for the letter and not the life-giving Spirit..... We’re oblivious to the wonder of our being and all being, and see the world in terms of consumption, filling our deficiency with things, market

share, and product placement. We don't have time to marvel at a baby's birth, a child's laugh, a photo of a far off galaxy, a bird in flight, a whale breaching, or a couple walking hand in hand. We become objects to ourselves – we are what we tweet – and not beloved children, mysterious, wonderful, and a little wild. “

The Last Sunday of the Epiphany – today – is a pivot point. We've spent the last seven weeks wondering who this child in a manger is for us, now we look toward Lent and turn toward simplicity as in this moment we're offered a transfigured perception and way of life.

Because the thing is, the mystic moment of the transfiguration isn't a thing in itself; and we miss it's true significance if we think that it is. Not just Jesus is transfigured on this day, we are too, as we're offered a broader meaning for that word: our journey now is into wonder, and beauty, and awe, through the life-giving Spirit.

And our journey is also a concrete pathway – not only about our transfiguration, our transformation. It's also

“about transforming the world, reclaiming the garbage dump and creating a garden, reviving dying ecosystems and bringing new life to decimated environments, restoring broken communities and rejoicing in new forms of sustainable employment for those displaced by corporate greed and technological advancement.” (Bruce Epperly)

Light bursts forth, and we are all now beloved children of God, all transfigured, transformed, filled with God's grace. Now is the time to begin using that grace for good, to help bring about our world's transformation, and everyone in it too.