

“We’ve Been To The Mountaintop Together”

- I. Introduction: The mountaintop. We’ve been to the mountain top together, you and I. Going to the mountaintop has long been an important Christian metaphors: When we yearn for a special time of closeness with God, when our hearts and minds are troubled, or even when we need God’s help in some special way, we talk about “going to the mountaintop.” It’s in our Judeo-Christian DNA: Moses went to the mountaintop to talk with God and receive the law and Elijah went to the mountaintop to be restored by God. Jesus often went into the mountains to be alone with his Father and in today’s reading he went to the top of the mountains to talk with Moses and Elijah. As our Gospel tells us, he took Peter, James, and John with him, and there they witnessed the Transfiguration. Jesus’ appearance changed and became dazzling white. Then God spoke to the three Apostles, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” The presence of the glorified Jesus filled the eyes, the ears, and the consciousness of these three men. They had been to the mountaintop and they had a story to tell.
- II. I believe that we, too, here at Church of the Ascension, have been to the top of the mountain. And I believe that we, too, have an important story to tell. Last week, as you know, it was announced that the Vestry had unanimously called me to become the seventh Rector of the Church of the Ascension. I gladly accepted that gracious offer, and we look forward to an installation service, commonly called “A Celebration of New Ministry” on a Sunday in early May. I had the opportunity last week to preach at the 10:30 service and share my reflections about the transition we have been experiencing together. But our preaching rotation did not afford me the chance to talk directly with those of you who worship together at the 8:00 service. I am glad to have that opportunity this morning. And the story of the Transfiguration provides us, I believe, with a rich way of thinking about this transition in our life together.
- III. First to set the stage. Slightly more than two years ago, this parish was in a state of uncertainty. I had been asked by our Bishop to consider coming here as the Priest-in-Charge-Under-Special-Circumstances. I must admit that I do not regret the opportunity to dispense with that title, because it has proved to a challenge to explain to others what special circumstances we were under. So now we can leave that term behind! Through the grace of God, we each listened for the Holy Spirit to speak to us, Peg and I, and the Ascension Search Committee and Vestry. We began our conversations and then our journey together. But clearly, you and I did not know at the begin-

ning where our journey together would take us. We began our journey with hope and positive intentions, but without any concrete assurance about how long we would be together.

In my opinion, the apostles who went with Jesus did so because he asked them to go with him, but without clarity about where they were going and what they would experience. As it turned out, their visit to the mountaintop was filled with wonder. They saw Christ for who he was, and they were prepared for the experiences that lay ahead of them. In the three Synoptic Gospels, the story of the Transfiguration marks the turning point between the first part of Jesus' ministry, which is filled with healings, miracles, and teaching, to the second part, which is his journey to the cross. The story of the Transfiguration serves as a transition toward the cross and the Resurrection. Both before and after this event in Mark, Jesus told his disciples that he was going to die and in three days rise again. The Transfiguration, like many mountaintop experiences, was not the end of the story, it was a chapter that helped the apostles better understand and deal with the upcoming events in Jerusalem.

- IV. So it is with our mountaintop experience here at Church of the Ascension. I say in my letter in this month's parish paper that after coming here, Peg and I fell in love with the people of this parish. It felt like we had come home to the place where God was calling us to go. The culminating moment of being called and answering yes to that call is very much a blessing and a gift from God. We could not be more pleased than to be here with you. And it is right and fitting that we should enjoy this time together.

At the same time, I believe with all my heart that God does not intend for us to stay indefinitely on the mountaintop. Just as Peter, James, and John had to come back down the mountain, we are called to do so as well. God has given us at Ascension a very grace-filled time in our life together, and God is writing a new chapter in the life of our parish. We have been shown how God can walk with us from a gray foggy place with very limited visibility into a place filled with light. First, this is a story we need to comprehend and record in our own history. We, you and I, need to be able to recollect and tell this story to others who will come after us, or even to others who left and might desire to be here again. And in case we are not always clear, the underlying truth of our story is that our God is faithful and will take care of us as long as we are faithful in return.

Let's reflect for a moment on how the story of Ascension continues to unfold. After their mountaintop experience, the apostles were called to journey with Jesus toward Jerusalem. We are called to a life of deepening faith and increasingly action in our life together as enter into the holy season of Holy Lent. Lent is a sacred time to open ourselves in a particular way to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Let us not rush through the gifts of Lent to a hurried Easter. I encourage each one of us to attend one of the

Ash Wednesday services, and, throughout Lent, to be regular in our attendance at Sunday worship. I also invite each on of us to participate in a special Lenten educational offering on Sunday morning or Wednesday evening. During the past two years, many in the parish have engaged in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and found it to be very meaningful. I would encourage you to talk with one of the clergy about partaking of that Sacraament.

- V. Conclusion. I hope that we will not too easily forget our mountaintop experience. It is so easy to forget. Later in Mark, chapter 9, the disciples began to argue about who would be the greatest in Christ's Kingdom. This is made all the more incredulous because just before the disciples had began arguing among themselves, Jesus had just told them a second time that he would soon die. It is so easy to forget. As we move together into our future, let's hold ourselves accountable to remember what God has done here, what God desires from us, and what a wonderful, grace-filled future God has in mind for this parish.