

Sermon Preached at St. Andrew's Church, Kent, on February 23, 2020

—The Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's readings from scripture got me to thinking about two of my favorite hikes in the area. Perhaps you've done them yourself at some time. One is the fairly easy hike up Schaghticoke Mountain from near Bulls Bridge to the so-called Indian Rocks, with their view south down the Housatonic Valley and west into New York State. Maybe the ascent takes about 45 minutes, but the view from the top is worth it. The other one—if you take the approach from the trail coming from the north—isn't very long but it's definitely a tough climb: going up Cobble Mountain in Macedonia State Park. Perhaps you've clambered up those rocks, pulling yourself up by the rope that marks the trail from that approach. The view from up there, looking toward Dutchess County, is stunning.

If you haven't gone to either of those locales, I'm guessing you've climbed at some point in your life to the top of some mountain here in New England. Did you know that the second most commonly hiked mountain in the world is Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire? Perhaps it's a four-hour drive from Kent, but there's a great 360 degree view. I've done it three times. What compels so many people to hike it? Why, in general, are we drawn to mountaintops? I cannot tell you how many times that I've hiked to the top of Schaghticoke Mountain just to sit there for awhile, staring out at the view and pondering the verities of life. I might not even be sure about the nature of those verities. Maybe it's a sense that the mundane details of my life are really just that—mundane details—and I'm reminded in that vision from above that there are more important things in life, that there is more to life than our scramble to get by on daily basis.

Perhaps that is why in so many cultures across the globe the mountains are holy, the place where one encounters God or the gods, the source all that matters in life. For the ancient Greeks, it was Mount Olympus, the top of which was often shrouded in a band of clouds. For

the Lakota tribes of the Great Plains, it was the Black Hills. For the Japanese, it was and remains Mount Fuji—the one mountain in the world that tops Monadnock for the number of people who summit it each year—despite the great challenge that goes into hiking it. And for Moses and the people of ancient Israel, it was, as we heard in this morning's lesson from Exodus, Mount Sinai. The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." We are told that "the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel." The fancy word for such a manifestation of the divine is a theophany. When, after that theophany was finish, Moses came down from the mountain forty days later, he brought with him the tablets on which was written God's word, in the finger of God, later identified in Exodus as his commandments. Thus, in his encounter with God on the mountaintop, there was a great truth revealed to Moses—all that mattered—the eternal law of God defining our relationship with God and each other. Indeed, what matters in that

moment of revelation *is* the Law, the revelation of God to his people on Mt. Sinai.

All of that is in the backdrop of this morning's reading from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. In this Gospel, Jesus takes three people—Peter, James, and John—to the top of a mountain, possibly Mount Tabor, which arises unsurrounded by other hills on the plains of Galilee. It is a full and complete peak experience, with a 360 degree view of the surrounding countryside. Suddenly, there at the top, Peter, James, and John have a vision of what matters—and what matters in life is Jesus, transfigured with dazzling array, with Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets) beside him.

Three things stand out for me about this theophany—three things that distinguish it from other such peak experiences. First is the reaction of Peter. He says to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” Peter—a mere six days after the moment when he confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God—somehow sees what is going on—but he wants to preserve it by building a shelter,

a dwelling, a tabernacle for each holy man: Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. It is as if he is so caught up in the moment and wants to capture it, preserve it, bottle it, turn it into a shrine—who knows what, but somehow he wants to hold onto it. Again, “It is good for us to be here,” he says. He does not want that moment of sacred rapture to end.

But a second thing happens. A voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” We heard those same words at the start of Epiphany, on the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, as Jesus embraced his public ministry. They serve as bookends on the season of Epiphany, with one difference. This time the heavenly voice adds one line: “Listen to him!” After that, Moses and Elijah disappear. Peter, James, and John fall the ground and are left there with the one to whom now they must listen and follow—Jesus. Again— “Listen to him.” Listen to this one who you have seen proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven and ministering to the people. Listen to this one who seems now to be superseding Moses and Elijah. Listen to this one who has told you that he must in time suffer at the

hands of the chief priests and scribes, that he must be crucified and after three days be raised. Listen to him.

The third thing about this peak experience is easy to miss, perhaps because, on one level, it seems self-evident: With Jesus presumably leading the way, he and his disciples come down from the mountaintop—because it was not the mountaintop that mattered. Unlike other peak experience, in this one our God came down from the mountaintop to carry on his ministry with the people in *their* valleys, in the midst of the hardships of life, a ministry to people who were hurting in mind, body, and spirit—a ministry that would ultimately carry him to the Jerusalem and the cross and resurrection. Our God, the one for whom Peter wanted to build a dwelling on the mountaintop, came down to be with his people in the midst of the challenges of everyday life—their sorrows, their sins, their fears and worries—their valleys.

And so should we. You see, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we do not need to climb Schaghticoke Mountain to have a peak experience. I hope and trust you have experienced those peak moments in your life of faith. I know I have. I know I have seen glimpses in faith of what really

matters in life, glimpses of the grace and transcendence of God. There are moments of grace for me in my ministry at South Kent, perhaps even in chapel, when the boys are all singing and being attentive, when I find myself thinking the words of Peter, “It is good for us to be here.” I have felt that grace in the Sacrament in many fine and some humble churches, when we as Christians come together as one people. In that moment, I have felt connected in some transcendent way to God and the church across the ages, joining together in that bread and wine to find the living Christ, and, again, like Peter, I have thought to myself, “It is good for us to be here.” Indeed, I have felt that same grace here at St. Andrew’s, even or especially over the last few months, with the stories I have heard of you all ministering to each other [such as were shared at the end of this service last week] with parishioners supporting each other, praying with and for each other. It has been a beautiful thing—for me a glimpse of the grace of God and the transfigured and shining Christ in our midst, here in this parish.

Those have been peak experiences. In all of those moments, like Peter I can find myself saying, “It is good for us to be here,” and for

those moments I give thanks. But like Peter, we're called to follow Jesus down from the mountaintop into the valleys of everyday life, for those peak experiences of God's grace should not be the end of the story. Like Jesus, we're called to come down from the mountaintop. We come here, to this church, to be strengthened here, to be strengthened through our peak experiences, for the ministry given to us as his disciples in the valleys of everyday life—in the love and grace that we're called to bring to God's children in their sorrows, fears, and regrets.

Our God came down from the mountaintop. Jesus Christ came down from that transcendent experience on Mt. Tabor, and, rather than dwelling on the joys of what had been, trusted in the resurrecting love of God, turned himself toward the Jerusalem and the cross, and gave himself over to a life of love and sacrifice. So too should we, and, when we do that, I am sure we will find that he has been with us in the valleys of our lives as well. Amen.