



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

February 14, 2021
The Last Sunday After the Epiphany

Solemn Evensong
3pm

+

A Sermon by
Father Mark Brown

on
Ecclesiasticus 48:1-11 and John 12:24-32

+

A Sermon for the Last Sunday After the Epiphany

This afternoon we bask in the afterglow of this morning's gospel: the Transfiguration of Christ. The traditional site of this event is Mt. Tabor. If you were to ask a four-year old child to draw a picture of a hill, that's about what it looks like: round as a bowl and just sticking up there seemingly disconnected from any geological context. What's most stunning about Mt. Tabor is actually the view from the top, which has to be one of the most beautiful and exhilarating anywhere: a grand, panoramic sweep in all directions.

Facing east, the hills around Nazareth are back over your left shoulder about 5 miles away. At about 10:00 in the far distance is Mt. Hermon, snowcapped this time of year, about 35 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Straight ahead about 10 miles is the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee, and across the eastern horizon, the mountains of Jordan. At about 2:00 are the hills of Gilboa, where King Saul met his end. In the same direction, beyond the hills of the West Bank and too far to see, is Jericho, where Elijah was taken up by the whirlwind in a chariot of fire. Just at the foot of Mt. Tabor from about 2:00 back around to 5:00 is the rich, fertile Valley of Jezreel. The Carmel range is almost directly behind us to the west, as is the port city of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. It's a breathtakingly beautiful view in all directions.

We might wonder why Jesus and the disciples went up that mountain to pray. They didn't have to. They didn't have to go to all that effort if what they needed was just some peace and quiet. And the taxis at the bottom were not an option back then. Why did they bother to trudge all the way up the mountain?

Maybe for the same reason we go up the mountain: for the view! For the sheer beauty and exhilaration. For the expansiveness of the mountain top. We human beings are drawn to the expansiveness of high places--which says something important about our nature, something about our desire for transformation, for transfiguration. We are drawn to the beauty and expansiveness of God's creation because we sense its transfiguring power.

The Transfiguration is a story about Jesus, of course, and a vision of the fullness of his divine life. But it's also about us: a vision of the fullness of Resurrection life that awaits us. *O wondrous type, O vision fair, of glory that the church may share.* [H1982, #137] "...we will be like him, for we will see him as he is..." [1 John 3:2] As with Jesus, so with us.

Although we anticipate this greater and more glorious life even now, the life we have is the one we have now: this life of flesh and blood--created of the dust of the earth, given to us and redeemed by God. Our ultimate transfiguration, for now, belongs to the future.

But without losing sight of the heavenly, we can claim an earthly, fleshly dimension of transfiguration even now. An inner transfiguration rather than something outwardly visible. The dazzling white garments come later, in God's good time.

When we take in the majestic sweep of the view from the mountain top, we become more than we were before. In a sense, we eat the scenery—we take its splendor, its beauty into ourselves, we take its expansiveness into ourselves. We are what we eat, and so we become more than we were. That beauty, that expansiveness becomes part of who we are. We have been changed, transformed, transfigured. Not in the whiter than snow, glow in the dark kind of way, but in a more organic, flesh and blood way.

I wonder if Jesus and the disciples ever spent the night on Mt. Tabor. I wonder if they took in the vastness of the firmament as they gazed into the night sky. In taking in the sheer immensity of the cosmos, we begin to comprehend something of the sheer immensity of the One who created it. And in so doing, we see our lives in a new light, from a new perspective—even if just for a while. And new perspectives can be liberating—and transformative.

So we go to the mountain tops. Sometimes literally. But there are many different iterations of the mountain top—and not all of them geological. For some of us, it can mean things which can only be seen through the most powerful microscope or the most far-reaching telescope. Or going to the bottom of the sea, or into the depths of a cave. Or driving across the geological wonder of seemingly endless miles of glacier-swept Mid-western prairie. Or feeling the thunder of the breakers of the sea. Or, strolling through our favorite woods, or the glories of Olmstead's Central Park. Or even things which can never be seen, but only inferred from a complex mathematical equation handwritten by a nuclear physicist on a chalk board. Taking in the beauty and wonder of God's creation, eating the scenery (as it were), can be transformative. We become more than we were. There is a bigness to life, there is an expansiveness to God's creation that we absorb into our own being.

For some of us the mountain top is the work of human hands and heart: the Frick, the Met, the Opera House, Carnegie Hall. A magnificent church! Ralph Adams Cram knew exactly what he was doing when he designed this building, how architectural magnificence can enlarge the soul. These artistic pursuits extend the reach of God's own creative energies, God's transforming and transfiguring energies. There's so much to take in, whatever our preferred mountain top is. We needn't go all the way to Mt. Tabor.

One more thing—one more thing must be mentioned. Yes, there are many sources of transformation and change in this world. But one is the most transfiguring of all—one enlarges the soul more than anything else. A few days ago I happened to notice a window display celebrating Black History Month. It featured this quote by Prince Rogers Nelson, otherwise known as just plain Prince, who said: *"Compassion is an action word with no boundaries."*

Compassion is the most expansive, the most transformative, the most transfiguring of all because it is the closest thing to God's very essence. And, being closest to God's own essence, boundless. Expansive beyond all measure, vast beyond all imagining. And the doing of it—the doing of compassion, the action of it--goes further than anything else we know in lifting up Christ that all the world might be drawn to him.