

The High Point

The Transfiguration of Our Lord
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On Interstate 80, in the northwestern part of our state, not far from my hometown of Ridgway, there is a sign which reads: ***Highest Point of Elevation on Interstate 80 East of the Mississippi***. I never fail to remark on that sign to my kids in the back of our van when we pass it on the way to my parents' home. I always have them think about that, and check out the scenery. Of course, our little Appalachians are no match for what's in the Rockies. The kids saw much grander elevations when we vacationed out west last summer. And that high point on 80 is by no means anything like the highest peak I've been on.

I was traveling with my college choir in Austria years ago. (Now my college choir is the Thiel College Choir, which happens to be performing a concert here at Trinity in the nave next Saturday evening at 7 p.m. You may just want to stick around after worship next week and attend.) Anyway, I was traveling with my college choir in Austria. We were touring Innsbruck, site of the 1964 and '76 Winter Olympics. I didn't think much at first of that city, but I thrilled to my trip up Mt. Hafelekar. It is one of the highest points of that section of the Swiss Alps, and rises to over 7,600 feet over Innsbruck. To get to the top, you take a series inclined railways and suspended cable cars. (If you suffer from fear of heights, this is not the tour for you.) Along the way, you look down and see the city of Innsbruck getting smaller and smaller. Then you see clouds beneath you. Finally, you step out onto a rocky mountaintop, and while you know it is not Mt. Everest, it is most certainly more than the Appalachians. You almost believe you are at the top of the world.

That's pretty much what Peter believed—that he had reached the pinnacle, the climax of his discipling days with Jesus, the top of the world. Actually, it was simply a trip up a steep mountain grade—dusty, dirty, tiring, seemingly unproductive. You get to the top, you turn around, you come back down. You'd think if Jesus was looking for an out-of-the-way place to pray, he could have found a destination easier to reach.

But that is the place Jesus chooses, his closest disciples with him. So they begin their trek, and after awhile, the village and its people silently slip away beneath them. When they reach the top of the mountain, it turns out that the view is not the crucial thing. Instead, it's what occurs right in that space at the top that matters: Brilliant light—light that makes you blink and stagger and wonder what in the world hit you! Jesus glows, his clothing as white as bleach could ever make them. Plus it's no longer just Jesus before them, but also two of the greatest prophets of Jewish scripture—Moses and Elijah. And they are talking with Jesus.

Peter, as a nervous or slightly terrified person is want to do, starts jabbering away. He blabbers on about building some structures for Jesus, Moses and Elijah to rest in. But that idea dies away into nothing. For what comes next is a great interruption from a cloud and a voice which commands decisively: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*

Now, since Peter and the other disciples couldn't hear what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about on the mountaintop, it seems the voice is telling them to listen to what Jesus has

already told them when they were down in the valley. And then as well to listen to what Jesus will tell them when they complete this mountain hike, and *go back down* into the valley. Read Mark's Gospel and see where this Transfiguration story is located. It follows a conversation Jesus had with his disciples where he predicted that he would be rejected, would suffer and die, and then be raised again. Peter was *listening* back then, but not the way he should have. Instead, he tried to talk Jesus out of the whole suffering-and-death thing, told Jesus it couldn't, wouldn't be that way. (Yet another example of a nervous or slightly terrified disciple jabbering and blabbering . . .) So Jesus teaches his disciples that to follow him would involve taking up their own crosses, denying themselves, losing themselves in order to save themselves, in order to gain life. That's the stuff the voice commands them to listen to.

I'm sure it was wonderful up there on the mountain. I'm certain the idea of hanging out awhile was tempting. But God interrupted that idea with pointed instruction. Listen to him—listen to Jesus who, though for the moment was bathed in light, was already mentally on his way back down the mountain to serve and heal, forgive and love, suffer and die. Maybe all that blaze of glorious light was merely intended to get the disciples' attention long enough to prepare them for the challenging journey ahead.

Jesus and his disciples go back down the mountain, and the next thing Mark records as happening is someone bringing to Jesus their son who was suffering. And suffer the boy did—so convulsed by seizures was he that he couldn't speak and couldn't stand, the violent fits dashing him to the ground, making him foam at the mouth. Mark tells us how Jesus heals the boy. That's the story we hear next. That's the Jesus the disciples are to listen to.

Now, maybe some of us get excited when we see *Highest Point of Elevation on Interstate 80 East of the Mississippi*. Others of us thrill to the view from the Rockies or the Alps or Pole Steeple at Pine Grove Furnace. But shouldn't it take our breath away to know Jesus is in the valley making someone whole again? Isn't that what life—real life—is all about?

Frankly, when I reached the top of Mt. Hafelekar, when I got off the cable car and walked around the peak, my first moments were spent gazing at the vast space around me, the distant peaks of other mountains rising up above the clouds. Then I looked more closely at the spot where I was standing. All I could see around me was dull, gray-brown rock. Not a green thing was growing. It was, after all, above the tree line. I should have realized that going that high meant moving beyond vegetation. See, it was down in Innsbruck—the city I did not take much notice of initially—where the hustle and bustle of life was going on. Where joys and sorrows were being experienced. Down in that valley were people facing the challenges of daily living. That was the place where Jesus and his disciples were meant to be. Where they would both find—and give—life.

And that's precisely where Jesus goes after his transfiguration up on the mountaintop. He comes down into a world teeming with life. He comes down ready to meet head-on for our sake the needs and challenges and heartaches we all face. He comes down to bring strength and healing and a transfiguration of our lives, so that our own lives might at last conform to his. It will be in those places, where our hearts are changed to love like him, that the Glory of God is truly revealed. AMEN.

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