

A Last Epiphany 2026
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Matthew 17:1-9

Each year before we begin the season of Lent, we hear the story of Jesus' Transfiguration from the Gospel of Mark, Matthew or Luke

Today, Matthew tells about a trek by Jesus, Peter, James and John to a high mountain—probably Mt. Hermon—in a manner reminiscent of Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai, recorded in our lesson from Exodus

So we end the season of Epiphany on a high note, even a dazzling note, where Jesus' Christological vocation is affirmed, even as it will be tested in the Lenten journey

The Transfiguration story allows us a climactic example of a theophany—God's manifestation or epiphany—in the person of Jesus, hence its inclusion on the final Sunday of this season

Equally important, however, the Transfiguration looks forward and serves as a critical premonition of Jesus' eventual suffering at the end of Lent

At the pinnacle of this story, Jesus talks with Moses and Elijah

The English translation unfortunately is lame when it says they discussed Jesus' 'departure' to be accomplished in Jerusalem

The Greek word literally is '*exodos*,' which both refers back to Moses in Exodus while it foretells Jesus' trip to Jerusalem and his upcoming '*exodos*' in death

Like Moses, Jesus' *exodos* will be one of suffering that claims our liberation decisively in his death and resurrection

So this story makes a wonderful transition from Epiphany—with its manifestations of God's work in Christ—and Lent and its preparation for Jesus' *exodos* at Jerusalem for you and me

Proclaiming Jesus as the Christ may be the punch line of our story, but it is not the only theme with which we can identify

The human response to Jesus always catches our imagination, because all too often it becomes the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected

Peter remains one of my scriptural heroes, and today we find him in all his bumbling human glory

Aimed with today's technology, Peter would have sought to turn a numinous experience into an Instagram moment—the selfie of all selfies

Instead of living in the divine present—among the most awesome of human history—Peter becomes obsessive and seeks to put God in the box of three pedestals, one for Moses, Elijah and Jesus

Peter has received a bad rap over the years by many a preacher who chides him for lusting after trophies rather than contemplating the divine

I've always had a warm spot for Peter's 'ready-fire-aim' approach to following Jesus, probably because—when I am honest with myself—I see myself therein reflected

Like any pivotal and defining life experience, Peter wanted to capture the moment for posterity, even at the risk of losing the immediacy of that moment

Whenever we taste the holy, our first impulse is to wrap our souls around it, freeze-dry it if necessary, and build a spiritual shrine to the glory days, even when God knows there will be valleys to follow the peaks as we navigate life's ups and downs

Of course, we would be here all day if we began to tell the stories—past and present—of God's transfiguring power in our personal and common life

It's hard to be against godly transfigurations, and we hold them dear as life-defining moments in our spiritual journey

And yet, counter-intuitive as it might sound, transfigurations actually can complicate our common life if we cling to them selfishly, rather than allowing them to be part of our larger witness

Remember, it must have been hard for Jesus to fall asleep that night, and yet much, much more of his unique vocation had to be played out in the days ahead

Yesterday, our vestry held an organizing retreat and shared personal excitements and concerns for our common life that teased out the

transfiguring parts of our parish life, sharing both our dreams about how God's healing power might transform us and identifying the stumbling blocks that risk our turning wine into water

In doing so, we face both opportunities and pitfalls: the pitfall is that we lapse into Peter-like 'ready-fire-aim' postures, speaking **at** others rather than listening to them

This danger plays itself out when **my** dazzling experience at St. Barnabas should be memorialized by a trophy booth on the mountain, when **my** remembrance of our glory days becomes the benchmark for the future of our common, institutional vocation

When we practice dialogue, however, we place at least equal priority on understanding the other as we do on expressing our opinions, as important as our own opinions may be

This positive dynamic happened in most of our recent Table Conversations and in yesterday's vestry retreat

Dialogue requires listening: the first Sunday and last Sundays of Epiphany—Jesus' baptism and transfiguration—both contain the most bellowing proclamation by God from the parted heavens in all of Scripture: "**Listen to him!**"

Also, today's transfiguration story reminds us that sharing our dreams is far riskier than sharing our complaints: Jesus and the disciples faced ridicule by sharing such a transformational, outside-the-box experience that trumped a simple prayer service in the synagogue

In the midst of our individual and common spiritual journey, especially as we navigate a chaotic world, we need transfiguring moments to capture our imagination and to let us know—ultimately—who is in charge

We contemplate the other—holy or human—and always find the mystery of relationship, lest we turn God to an idol or turn a loved one into an object of our domination, projection and control

As Thomas Aquinas, writing in the 13th century, captures perhaps better than any Christian theologian, all things come from God and all things return to God in the cosmic scope of God's plan for this world

As people of faith and in the spirit of Thomas Aquinas, we believe that everything comes from God and everything returns to God

We if truly believe that God meets us as we move toward God, we also can plan with joy for the coming of more transfigurations in our lives, both individually and communally

Put more simply and counter to much of today's cultural crazy talk, life is good—its past, its present, and its future

We are an optimistic, hopeful people—whether we contemplate worldly affairs amid stressful times, whether we plan for the future of St. Barnabas's Church, or whether we contemplate the end of our earthly journey

We can cherish our historic experiences of transfiguration, but we should always journey toward a bright future in Christ's love, always trusting that God has abundant joy, awe and love in our future

That promise to us was secured with the blood of Christ on the cross, that promise should infuse our parish planning and search process, that promise fills the experience even of our own burial office, when we proclaim

“All we go down to the dust, yet even at our grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.”

The great Renaissance English mystic, Julian of Norwich, captured her final vision of transfiguration in the faith statement: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well” in God all will be well

That, my friends, focuses the Good News of the gospel

Each of us remains open to new experiences of divine and human transfiguration, even as we cherish those experiences of our past

But the Christian faith always remains future-oriented with joyous expectation

Let us be of good cheer as a faithful Church and as God’s gift to this broken world

In our parish planning and the way we treat each other, let us listen as often as we speak, and when we speak let’s sharing the riskier stories of our longing to be transformed by God’s piercing love

Most importantly, let us live lives of joyous thanksgiving, offering ourselves to God’s service as holy, redeemed and transfigured witnesses to God’s past and future blessing.