Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 15, 2026
Matthew 17: 1-9

Back Down the Mountain

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Barabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.

On this last Sunday in the season after the Epiphany, on this threshold between Ordinary Time and the vast Lenten wilderness that lies ahead, we hike up the mountain with Peter, James, and John to share an experience of striking awe and beauty that was far more than a mere "feel good" moment. Jesus, the teacher who Peter, James and John had been following from town to town, the one with dusty sandals and an inner compass set firmly in the direction of Jerusalem… this charismatic and determined one… dramatically changes in appearance right before the trio of astonished disciples. Jesus' clothes turned a dazzling white while his face became radiant, shining like the sun. The scene becomes more otherworldly as the prophets Moses and Elijah appear next to Jesus as if in conversation. It must have been frustrating for the disciples not to know what the three were discussing… and though we don't have the slightest clue about the content of the conversation, one senses that they were discussing topics far more profound than the weather. A cloud then overshadowed the scene. The disciples fall to the ground in fear as they hear a booming voice say, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" We have heard this voice before, at the River Joran when Jesus rose up out of the water after his baptism. This time, the voice adds an exclamation point: "Listen to him!"

At an apex moment in the church year, we encounter stark contrasts as we are presented with an intense, breathtaking, mountain top experience… before heading down the mountain… and back into the routines of our daily lives and the challenges of our conflicted world… as the vast wilderness or Lent begins to appear on the horizon.

The rhythm of our daily lives are interspersed with both awesome mountain top experiences… and… at the other end of the spectrum… quieter moments of feeling God's peaceful calm. Some of us crave intense spiritual experiences and like to measure the "success" of our faith life by tallying up moments of breathtaking dazzle… times when the movement of the Spirit is experienced bodily, and the sound of Jesus' voice is heard as clear as day. Others prefer quieter, more sublime experiences of God's presence. There is no one right or wrong way to approach the holy… and there is no clear means of measuring success. Our experiences of God… our life of prayer… cannot be graded. The quality and duration of our worship or devotional time is not recorded in some divine ledger. Bonus points are not raked up for extra Bible study or for going above and beyond with our good deeds. There is no ruler to measure how far we advance after going through the pain of heart-shredding experiences. The paradox is… that to be an "achiever" in the realm of the Spirit… means ending the quest to be ranked as an "achiever." In the realm of spirituality and devotion… we are to let go of trying to prove… anything. What is important… as we live our days… is being faithful and intentional about opening our hearts, our minds, and our awareness… to God's abiding presence, and to God's message to us. We can deepen our awareness by developing holy habits of attention… of setting aside time… on a regular basis… to be

intentional about opening our awareness to God's presence. We don't ask God to be present to us.... We do not invite God to join us at the dinner table or at a meeting... because God is always present. In our prayer petition, we ask for help... that we may grow our awareness of God's abiding, steadfast presence. A time set aside for daily prayer and devotion promises to deepen our relationship with God and to enrich our lives. Carving out time each day to pray, read, listen and reflect on God's message to us, is not to be just another task to be checked-off on a daily "to do" list. Such time spent in quiet listening, however short, is an invitation to step across a threshold... from the busyness of our lives... into a realm of deeper relationship, refreshment, and understanding... that promises further to develop our ability to recognize God's presence throughout our days. Debie Thomas describes her experience this way:

> *"For as long as I can remember, I've measured the depth and "success" of my faith by the number of mountaintop experiences I can truthfully claim. Have I 'felt the Spirit' in Sunday morning worship? Has Jesus 'spoken' to me? Have I seen visions? Spoken in tongues? Encountered God's living presence in my dreams?...*
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> *"...Here's the thing: I still yearn for mountaintop experiences, and that's okay. They'll come and go according to God's will and timing, not according to my micromanagement. In that sense, sublime spiritual experiences are easy; they require little from me. I can't control them. What's hard is consenting to follow Jesus back down the mountain. What's challenging is learning to cultivate awe and wonder in the face of the mundane. What's essential is finding Jesus in the rhythms and routines of the everyday. In the loving touch of a friend. In the human voices that say, "Don't be afraid." In the unspectacular business of discipleship, prayer, service, and solitude. In the unending challenge to love my neighbor as myself."*[1]
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> *"What's hard is consenting to follow Jesus back down the mountain..."*
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As we prepare to enter Lent, we take with us an awesome mountain top experience. We head back down the mountain to live our days... some days that will be quite ordinary, others that will be challenging and stressful... maybe even weighted down with pain and grief... and other days that will be adorned with surprising moments of awe and joy. The promise is that... in all our days... God walks with us. The invitation is to become ever more aware, ever more deeply attuned to God's presence with us on this journey we call life.

As we descend the mountain this year, we return to a world in which anger, violence and war seek to drown out the message that Jesus came to teach... and show... us. Jesus did not back down in confronting earthly powers of empire that sought to silence his voice and his influence. For this, Jesus gave himself up to death. Torture... and even death itself... could not extinguish Jesus' message of freedom and life. Though Jesus spoke to the strife-ridden world of his time, the truth that he proclaimed back then... continues to ring through the centuries... and is with us today.

The last time I preached on the Transfiguration, the world was marking the first anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Our prayers that day included petitions for peace in Ukraine, for those suffering from earthquakes in Turkey and Syria and, as always, prayers for the sick and needy as well as petitions of for those who are far away and for those who are near. As it was then, it is now as we pray for strength and guidance through the storms and afflictions we are currently

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[1] Debie Thomas, "Is it Good For Us to Be Here?", *Journey with Jesus,* February 16, 2020, https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2535-is-it-good-for-us-to-be-here

experiencing. Very importantly, we are to offer gratitude for the gifts and goodness that we know in our lives. Developing a practice of gratitude, examining our days… works further to develop our ability to recognize God's strengthening, healing presence. Such practices direct us to confront forces of oppression that grieve the heart of God. Such practices promise to develop in us a clearer vision of God's reign on earth in which all are invited to be well and prosper with the gifts they have been given.

I would like to end with a prayer from David Haas' book of Lenten reflections*, Praying with the Word*:

God, you loom above and beyond
all things in [our lives]
[We] start with you,
[We] end with you,
and you are everything in-between.

[A whole season of]
of retreat and reflection [is before us]
[Help us to seize the gift
that you have waiting for [us].

You promise not a sword
but healing for [our] wounds.
You promise [us] an adventure
not death of endings
but an honest and fair obstacle
course –
that you run with [us]
that leads to a profound reward.

This is the time of fulfillment,
of possibilities,
of completion.

Help [us] hear your word
and remember that you do not
tempt [us]
but hold out for [us] a more
beautiful way,
filled with life to the full.

May [our lives] today
flow from your cross
and [our hearts] be filled anew.
May [we] dwell with you in all things.
Be with [us] when [we are] in trouble
and raise [us] up with you.

Amen.[2]

[2] David Haas, Praying with the Word: Lent, Holy Week and Easter, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, 1997, pp. 12-13.