

**2 PETER 1:16-21 (p. 984)**

**FEBRUARY 26, 2017**

**MATTHEW 17:1-9 (p. 798)**

**BLAINE**

**TRANSFIGURATION**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

God of Glory and Majesty, God of Power and Might, we long to be surrounded by your Splendor! We look forward to that day when the whole earth will be awash in your Wonder! Until then though, as we study your Word, grant us a glimpse of your Glory in the Cross. Open our eyes Lord, as well as our hearts and our minds, in order that we might truly see. We ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

**“ON THE MOUNTAINTOP”**

We were traveling in the Upper Peninsula last weekend, and with each new town a question came to mind; “How do people go about naming churches?” What parameters should one use? I mean, ours is easy. We are located in Blaine Township and affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciple of Christ). So Blaine Christian Church just makes sense. And there are others around here that are based on a geographic location too, coupled with denominational affiliation. First Congregational of Frankfort, Bear Lake Methodist, Benzonia Congregational, Kaleva Baptist, Elberta Methodist, Beulah Church of Christ!

Churches are sometimes named after biblical locations too. Bethany, Calvary, Eden and Antioch! And there are Crossroads churches and Orchard churches, Churches in the Glen, and Churches on the Hill! There is even one just east of here called the Buckley Gospel Tabernacle! ...But if you were going to name a church, how would you do it?

I've seen several named after Saints. Gregory, Jerome, Anthony and Anne—Francis and Joseph, Gertrude and Michael—Patrick, Stephen, Philip, and Andrew—Rita and Raphael—St. Mary, and St. Mary of the Woods, and St. Mary of the Mount Carmel Shrine! And there are some named after our Lord. Our Savior, Good Shepherd, Our Redeemer—Christ the King, Immanuel (with an I), and Emmanuel (with an E)—Trinity, Immaculate Conception, Church of the Nazarene—Prince of Peace, Sacred Heart, and Jehovah's Witness! I even saw one over in Fountain called "The Bachelor Evangelical Covenant Church", but please don't ask me what that means!

There is The Church Alive, The Prayer and Praise Assembly—The River of Life church and The Word of Life church—New Life, Resurrection Life, Path of Life, Greater Life, Son Life, Living Hope, New Hope, Heritage and Free! Lighthouse, Gospel Light, Harbor Light, Beacon, and Bell Tower—Victory, Bible, and Faith! I even saw one called "The Fellowship of Joy"! Can you believe it? I wonder if that's really what goes on inside! "The Fellowship of Joy"! Isn't that like calling your church "The Assembly of Constant Excitement", or "The Church Awash with Smiling Faces" or "The Holy Church of the Agreed-Upon Perpetual Good Mood"?

G. K. Chesterton, by the way, once said that "Angels are able to fly, because they take themselves lightly"! So I think we should take ourselves lightly! God seriously!

Ourselves lightly! But would you name a church on the collective felt-emotions of those inside? If that's the case, then Jesus' first Disciples should be called "The Fellowship of Fear"?

Peter, and James, and John, three founding members of the church, three Disciples, go with Jesus up onto a mountaintop, only to then fall face down on the ground in fear! They are terrified! And that experience was such a powerful one that Peter, thirty-plus years later, writes about it in his letter to the churches in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey! “We were eyewitnesses to His Majesty!” Peter declares! “He received Honor and Glory from God the Father when the voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased!’”

Peter’s first letter was intended to bring comfort and encouragement in tough times. But here, in his second letter the tone is different. Three years later Peter is on the verge of imminent death—about to be executed. And what he writes sounds like a flat-out warning! Peter doesn’t beat around the bush here! He talks about holding fast to the teachings of the faith! He warns us about those who attempt to distort the truth! And then he goes on to talk about a life-changing moment! “We were there,” he says! “We saw it with our own eyes! We heard the Voice of God ourselves! We saw Jesus changed, Transfigured, right in front of us! This isn’t some cleverly devised story, people! This is the truth! We saw it!”

Back then a journey up a mountain was considered a spiritual experience. It was like going to the Temple, or what going to church today is supposed to be like. Mountains and temples and synagogues and churches, are all places where one should expect to encounter the Presence of God—where Visions of the Almighty happen—where one anticipates that Divine Revelation will take place!

Moses, if you recall, was searching for guidance during the Exodus when he climbed up onto Mt. Sinai. And when he came back down, he was carrying the Ten Commandments! Elijah, one of the most famous Prophets of all-time, was running scared, hiding out from the wicked Queen Jezebel, when he climbed up onto a mountain searching for answers from God! Scholars believe it was in fact the very same mountain! And God spoke to Elijah, remember, in a gentle whisper, when he was quiet and still, focused and paying attention. The voice of Yahweh wasn't heard in the whirlwind—or in the earthquake—or in the all-consuming fire! Elijah was in a Holy Place, seeking God, much like we are today! But it was only when his heart was open, and he was still, that he could discern the voice of God! ...I wonder if that applies.

So today, anticipating a Word from God, seeking His Presence, the Disciples climb with Jesus up onto a mountaintop. There, they received far more than they bargained for, in both magnitude and direction! Scholars have spent centuries trying to explain it! Countless books have addressed the Transfiguration, and possibly millions of sermons! People have tried, with varying degrees of success! But a mountaintop journey has very little to do with analysis, and much to do with experience! So maybe wisdom lies in not so much trying to explain it, but rather, in taking the journey?

So grab your metaphorical walking sticks, if you will, and your Sheepskin Water Bota. Wrap up in your head scarf, or kaffieh, and slip into the Disciple's sandals for a moment. Stand right where they are standing. Or better yet, walk right where they are walking. Go to that mountaintop and just feel what it is that they are feeling!

You have been traveling with Jesus for almost three years now. You've given up a lot, your life and your livelihood. You simply packed up all of your things in a bag and wandered extensively throughout much of the land! Your whole world has been turned upside down by the preaching of this man! He is clearly a wise and learned Rabbi, as well as your personal Teacher and Friend! He is a powerful Healer too! You've seen it, time-and-time-again! And a man of deep faith!

Jesus is a Prophet too, that's obvious! He is blessed by Almighty God! He embodies wisdom beyond compare, beyond any human explanation! The leader of your little group, Peter, just six days ago publically declared that He is the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ—the Son of the Living God! That moment is still fresh in your mind! But then Jesus went and announced that He is heading to Jerusalem to die!

You are confused! That makes sense. It feels as if you are riding an emotional rollercoaster! You've seen some amazing things, and been given a glimpse of more to come! You've watched multitudes fed, with virtually nothing! You have witnessed people physically healed--and emotionally and spiritually set free with just a word! You've been privy to some powerful teachings, on subjects like faith, and duty, and obedience to God! You have even heard about the coming Kingdom! You have stood in awe as your Rabbi calmed storms with a verbal command! Watched as He defied the laws of physics by walking on the water! Your eyes, along with those of the blind were opened! You were made whole, along with those afflicted by disease! You feel clean again!

Jesus has gotten your attention, earned your awe and respect! You have climbed several metaphorical mountains of faith with this man, and experienced the power of Almighty God! But now, in this moment up on the mountain, something entirely unexpected has just taken place! Jesus was been exalted! Transfigured! Transformed! The Greek word that Matthew uses is metamorphosis. Maybe you've heard it. It means a complete change in appearance, but more telling maybe, a complete change in form! Think of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, only on an immensely grander scale!

His Glory is revealed! Who He is, His relationship with the Father is explicitly made know! The radiance of His Spirit, not to mention His face, is glowing like the sun! His clothes have become as white as light! His form has completely changed! I cannot even imagine what that would have been like! Your teacher, your friend, is suddenly shining with all the Glory of Almighty God, right in front of you! Imagine!

And standing there with Him are two Pillars of your Faith; Moses, the giver of the Law, and Elijah, one of the greatest Prophets of all time! Two giants of your religious tradition, two of the primary representatives of what you believe, The Law and The Prophets, appear as if out of nowhere and chat with Jesus, just as a voice calls out from Heaven saying "This is my Son, whom I love! Listen to Him!"

What could possibly be an equivalent today? Touring Washington DC, and having Lincoln and Washington share lunch with you and your mom! Visiting the Holy Land, and having Mother Teresa and St. Augustine riding on your tour bus, chatting with the driver! What would standing on that mountaintop with those two biblical giants be like? And then, having God Himself audibly bless the encounter!

I'll bet it added to Jesus' Credibility Bank, don't you think? Wouldn't you just want to scream, "Yes, This really is the Messiah"? How could you have any doubts after an experience like that? How would you respond? ... Well Peter, and James, and John, fell flat on their face, terrified!

"Overcome with fear" it says in the NRSV, or "greatly afraid" in the NKJV, or "overcome with fear" in the NJB! It's a sense of fear equated with reverence and respect. You may have heard that said before. But it is also a direct fear of the person! Don't miss that part, or gloss over it as so many do. It carries the sense of "Scared to Death"! They were filled with fear, and awe, and reverence, and terror, standing in the Presence of the Lord! So much so, in fact, that they drop to their knees, and then to their faces!

Up to now, these guys have known a lot "about" God. They grew up in the faith. They know the Scriptures. And they have been with Jesus for quite a while too. They have witnessed Miracles and Wonders right before their eyes! But now, when they see God face-to-face, things suddenly change! The Disciples are terrified! And if you recall, that seems to be a biblical pattern!

Didn't Adam and Eve hide from God after they had sinned, when they realized who God was, and who they were in His sight, even though they used to have a pretty good relationship? Didn't Moses hide his face when he heard the voice of God at the burning bush, and took off his shoes because that was Holy Ground? Didn't Isaiah say, "Woe is me," as he bowed in the Presence of God? Didn't Jeremiah start stammering, and immediately begin making excuses, "I am only a child, Lord. I don't know how to speak"? Isn't that similar to what Moses said, "Don't send me Lord, I don't talk so good"!

Wasn't Little Samuel so afraid of his encounter with Yahweh that he didn't even want to tell his mentor Eli? Doesn't Ezekiel describe his experience in the Presence of God as "the hand of the Lord heavy upon me"? Picture God's powerful grip on your shoulders, turning you in the direction you need to go! Wasn't it Jonah who actually ran away when God called? And aren't all these Biblical Heroes?

Have we forgotten what the Psalmist declares, that "The Fear of the Lord is beginning of wisdom"? Or that Solomon, the wisest of the wise, in his Proverbs says the very same thing! Have we missed that reoccurring theme? ...Experiencing God ought to cause reverence and awe, and maybe more than a little fear!

When Jesus helped his Disciples bring in a miraculous catch of fish after a long night of failure, Scripture says they felt fear! When Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, and saved the swamped boat, the Disciple felt fear!

When the women went to the tomb on Easter morning only to find it empty, they felt fear! Time and again we hear Jesus tell His Disciples to “not be afraid,”! And that’s only something you say when folks already are! Right!

So are we “A Fellowship of Fear”? ...Should we be? ...Maybe more than we are sometimes, but nowhere near as much at other times? I mean, how often are we afraid of all the wrong things, and at the expense of being in awe of the right things?

I see a progression, a process in these encounters. First, recognize who God is, acknowledge His Majesty and His Glory, Hallowed be thy Name! Then drop to your knees, or maybe fall flat on your face in Holy Reverence and Awe, and possibly even terror! Grasp how Holy God is, and how truly sinful you are. Acknowledge just how far apart that actually is! But then, reach out and accept the healing touch of Jesus. That’s what the Disciples did. The touch of God is what brought the frightened Prophets peace too. Be not afraid, we’re told! Look up and see only Jesus standing there. Then get up, off of the ground, and follow Him out into the world. Carry whatever Cross He asks for you to carry, wherever He asks you to carry it!

Peter missed part of that. He wanted to stay up on the mountaintop. He even suggested setting up tents, a lodge, a memorial chapel. He wanted to hold onto the moment for a while, to freeze the experience, to bask in the Glory of God for as long as he can! We sometimes do that too, don’t we, especially at a time or in a place where we powerfully experience God’s Presence.

Peter has no intention of traveling down into the valley, out into the world. He also doesn't want to go to the next mountain, the one called Calvary. Let's just forget Jerusalem Jesus! Let's stay right here! I'll set up some booths to commemorate the occasion! People will come from far and wide Lord, away from their troubles and cares! They'll see your Majesty, Jesus! Surely this is the fullest revelation of God, far better than any old Cross!

He was wrong, of course! And so are we when we try to capture an emotional moment, rather than follow Jesus out into the world. We are wrong, as well, when we hide out in fear from what comes next. We are a people who have experienced the Glory of the Lord! And that's not something to hide away!

You see, this isn't about cleverly devised stories. We are witnesses to the truth. We also have the message of the Prophets, which is completely reliable. And no prophecy of Scripture came about by the Prophets own interpretation, but rather, came from God, carried along by the Holy Spirit. You'd do well to remember that! And all of God's people said, Amen!

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

God of Glory and God of Grace, we bow before you now. Open us up to experience your presence, and change us so that we will never be the same again. Help our faces to reflect your love Lord. Flow through us like the brightness of day. Radiate on this ever-darkening world through all that we say and do.

Some of us are up on the mountaintop right now Lord. We feel so close to you, and know that we stand in your grace. Like Peter, we long to freeze this moment in time, so that our lives will only consist of knowing you. We feel transformed by your love. We are awed by your majesty and might. We are pleased to kneel in your presence.

Others of us though Lord, are down in the valley today. The shadows have closed in around us, and darkness surrounds our every thought. We feel distant from you Lord. We long deeply to connect with you. Some of us even feel abandoned and alone right now, wondering when you will shine once more in our life.

And yet, in faith, we do know that you are with us in each of these times. We stand on the promise that you will be our God, if we will but be your people. So we choose, this day, to follow your lead. We choose to take up our crosses, and walk with you as our Lord, and to carry them out into the world. So please, take our outstretched hands right now, as we reach them up to you.

Please also take the hands of our loved ones Lord, covering them with your blessings and showering them with your grace. Please reach out and touch .....

Please wrap your loving arms around them tightly, as we place them now before you in prayer. We ask these things in Jesus' Name, and pray together now the very prayer that He has taught us saying, Our Father...