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THE VIEW FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

Matthew 17:1-9; Epiphany Last A, Transfiguration; Feb. 14-15, 2026

For Midwesterners living on the flat plains, mountains are something foreign. If you have ever been to the Rocky Mountains out west or the alps of Europe and traveled to the top of a high mountain, it is a whole new experience. To ascend to the top of a high mountain gives an amazing view— as long as there are no clouds obscuring the view.

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. What were they able to see on the mountaintop?

Outside Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, where Deb and I were on vacation, there is a low mountain which we drove up in our rented car. At the very top is a large statue of Christ with outstretched arms, similar to the one overlooking Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. There was also a jungle botanical garden we strolled through up there. It was clear the day we visited, and we could see a long way in every direction. There was a cruise ship in the port and miles of beaches up and down the coast.

What we saw up there cannot compare to what Jesus' three disciples saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. **[Jesus] was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If You wish, I will make three tents here, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah."**

The word "transfigure" means "change in appearance." How Jesus normally looked changed on the mountaintop from that of an ordinary man to One having the brilliant glory of God Himself. The name of season of the church year drawing to a close today, Epiphany, means to show or manifest. In His Epiphany on the mountaintop, Jesus showed to His disciples that He was true God. Jesus' transfiguration led Peter to suggest that they put up tabernacles for Him and the two Old Testament saints. Peter was a businessman. Did he envision an opportunity to make money on this? Probably not.

The statue of Christ on the mountaintop outside Puerto Plata was built on a dome-shaped building. Inside it are shops selling souvenirs to the tourists coming to see the Jesus statue and the view from the mountaintop. Being able to see Jesus in transfigured glory with Moses and Elijah would draw large crowds and be a money-making opportunity for those able to exploit it.

God's purposes in showing Jesus in His divine glory had nothing to do with making money. **[Jesus] was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."** God the Father tied the view of Jesus on the mountaintop to the Word Jesus was speaking to them. The Father said to the three on the mountaintop, and to us, **"Listen to Him."**

At Jesus' baptism, when Jesus looked like any other ordinary man, God the Father spoke the same words heard on the mountaintop: **"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."** The One who made our baptism His by taking our sin on Himself as true man in the Jordan is the same glorious Son of God on the mountaintop. What did Jesus say to His disciples about His transfiguration while coming down the mountain? We will get to that later, but for now, God commands us to pay attention to what Jesus has to say; our faith in the transfigured Jesus depends on hearing His Word.

Before Deb and I left for our trip up the mountain to see the Christ statue, view of the city below, and stroll around the botanical garden, we checked the weather. Being on the top of a mountain when it is cloudy and rainy, you can't see anything.

It got cloudy on the Transfiguration mountaintop. **Behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified.** The disciples' view changed. With their faces to the ground in fear, they saw nothing but the dirt and rock in front of their noses. Why were they so afraid that they fell on their faces? This is the typical response of sinful people who are confronted with God's glory. Remember how God warned Moses that to see His glorious face would mean his death. The three were scared to death.

When we are confronted with our sinfulness by God's Word, the Catechism reminds us, "God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them." We have done many things against God's commandments; we are sinners, and that is a fearful thing. What can we do?

We have two options. We can be like the disciples when confronted with a vision of the glorious God and His Word and fall down on our faces terrified, looking down, which is our instinct. When we are afraid in our lives in this world, whatever it is causing our fear shrinks our world to this one, fearful thing. Nothing else is in our view. When we see our sin and its destructive consequences in our lives and the lives of others, it dominates our thinking and feeling. Nothing else matters as much to us as this one thing, but looking down we will fail to see or hear anything else. We're stuck. Our vision is limited and restricted when we look down. That's one option.

The other option is not to look down but look up. **But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.** Looking up, we see Jesus there for us and, as the Father told us, listen to Him. What the disciples saw when they looked up was Jesus looking like a man again and not God. He was still the same Jesus, but nothing to be afraid of.

This is what sinners like us need. The disciples were fearfully waiting for God's fist of wrath to beat them, but Jesus gently touched them with love and compassion. Jesus was there to help not hurt. Jesus was there to take away their fears along with their sins. We should see the same thing in Jesus. After we bow our heads confessing the guilt and shame of our sins, we hear Jesus say to us, **"Rise, and have no fear."** "Your sins are forgiven." Lifting up our eyes in faith, we will see no one but Jesus only.

Today, we were led up the high mountain to be shown who Jesus is, God's Son and our Savior from sin," the One who takes away our fears and raises us up. We heard our Father's voice. **"This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him."**

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.” Jesus, the Son of Man has long since died on the cross and risen from the dead, so there is nothing to keep us from telling everyone what we have seen and heard on the mountaintop, like Peter wrote in our Epistle today.

From a high mountain we can see a long distance. From there we can see where we will go. Jesus walked down the high mountain and led His disciples to a little hill outside the walls of Jerusalem where He died for our sins, was buried, and rose victorious for us.

Our view from this mountaintop includes not only Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection, but ours as well. We can see from here what’s coming for us. Although it’s a fearful thing to think of suffering and death coming for us, we have heard Jesus’ words of promise. **“Rise, and have no fear.”** The One who died for us and rose has given us a view of His transfiguration and our transfiguration. We have died with Christ in Baptism already, and we will be raised gloriously to live forever in the light of the Son. Amen.