

**Yr. A, Epiphany Last**  
**February 23, 2020**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1567 Words**

**Lessons: Exodus 24:12-18**  
**Psalm 2**  
**2 Peter 1:16-21**  
**Matthew 17:1-9**

The holy mountain was often blanketed with clouds. I'm not talking about Mt. Sinai with Moses or the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus, Peter, James and John. I'm talking about the Holy Mountain of Sewanee, Tennessee, the place I attended seminary.

Part of the nature of all holy mountains is the regular shroud of mist and clouds covering the upper elevations. From the world below it may seem decorative—bright, shining cumulus clouds wrapped like a shawl around the peaks. Yet, at the lofty plateau it is just dark...dense fog. Standing on *top* of the mountain, there is no sight to behold. Indeed, standing *there*, your sight is obscured, even blinded.

Isn't it ironic that the Law—that *first light* intended to reveal how we are to live with God and our neighbors—that *light* was delivered to Moses in the dark, dense fog? What may have seemed like a dramatic fire and cloud to the people far below must have seemed obscure—perhaps even invisible—to Moses who actually *entered* the cloud.

The Scriptures tell us it took Moses *forty* days and nights to make his way back down that mountain. We *know* Moses was transformed by the glory of God—over and over again when he ascended the mountain. Yet, the only record of Moses actually beholding the *appearance* of God happened down in the valley.

I remember trying to ride my bicycle one foggy afternoon from the seminary to our house. Mikell Lane was a narrow, winding road without any painted stripes marking the edges or the center. On clear days I could make excellent time on the steep downhill stretch, like a slalom skier leaning back and forth into the curves.

Yet, on that day, with dark, dense fog as thick as soup I was brought to a standstill. I thought I knew the twists and turns of the road, but I was afraid to trust my memory. Maybe I had not paid enough attention on the *clear days* to be able to navigate in the fog. Maybe it was a parable!

Just six days earlier Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Let's not assume this revelation by our own St. Peter was so crystal clear. After all, there were people all over the place *claiming* to be the Christ—the one anointed to deliver and save the people. The disciples themselves rattle off several of the competing theories. Maybe the Messiah is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or some other prophet.

Only Peter had the ability—or *maybe it was the courage*—to say it out loud. "It's *you*," he said to Jesus. "*You* are the Messiah!"

When Jesus affirmed St. Peter—"Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah," Peter must have felt like he was gliding on a smooth downhill stretch, coasting with confidence through the familiar twists and turns of the mission he and the other eleven disciples were sharing with Jesus. *Did* Peter see it clearly under the bright, blue skies of Caesarea Philippi?

When I was a boy there was a small, plastic contraption near the back door of our house. It had an adjustable head strap and a hinge on each side which allowed a small opaque 'shield' to be lowered in front of your eyes. My dad had dreamed of becoming an instrument rated pilot all his life. He wanted to learn how to fly safely in *all kinds* of weather. He would put on that opaque shield when the skies were blue and the sun was shining, so he could practice flying as if in the thick of white cumulus clouds.

“Dad, you’re flying more than 100 miles per hour without seeing where you’re going?” I asked.

He laughed. “It sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

It *is* crazy to put on blinders...unless you know there will be days with clouds. And, trust me, there *will be* days with clouds and darkness. Life is not all blue skies and sunshine. So wrote St. Paul to the Corinthians when he said, “We walk by *faith*, not by sight.” The same is true, I suppose, flying a plane or for riding a bike.

Six days after St. Peter was coasting with the thrill of identifying the Messiah, Jesus took him up a high mountain with James and John. And Jesus was transfigured before them. It must have been a sight to behold—the full, radiant glory of God shining like the sun with clothes dazzling white! They *even* saw Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus. Peter envisions a way to capture this holy moment on this holy mountain...*until*—mid sentence—they are *all overshadowed* by a cloud.

They can’t see a thing. There is this voice which *should have sounded* reassuring, saying words like “beloved” and “well pleased,” but the Gospel tells us plainly that Peter, James, and John fell to the ground, absolutely *terrified!*

Their vision was obscured, even blinded, by the dark, dense fog. What had seemed *perfectly glorious* a moment before, became *positively terrifying*. What had seemed clear and obvious now seemed elusive, invisible, frightening.

It was not until Jesus touched them that they could trust they would be okay. It was not until Jesus said, “Get up and do not be afraid.” that they found the courage to look, listen, and follow his call.

So, what do you find frightening about getting close to the glory of God? If you say, “I don’t know,” then I’m going to say its time you climbed a little higher up the mountain, and dare entering the cloud of *unknowing*.

You see, *sometimes* we might get to experience the dazzling glory of God...what is often called ‘a mountaintop experience.’ Other times, we experience the disorienting confusion and fear that are normal human reactions when we are overshadowed and enveloped by clouds.

So, I want to encourage you in this upcoming season of Lent to practice *using* your faith. Faith is like this gift of an amazing muscle hidden deep in your soul, and yet—it must be *exercised* in order to become strong.

We come together here to practice *exercising* our faith in God’s love...and then, we go out there to serve in Christ’s name *also to exercise* our trust in God’s love.

This does not mean ‘putting on blinders’ in the negative sense of denying reality. Rather, it means acknowledging that we don’t *have* all the answers, and sometimes we are going to have to walk by faith, *not by sight*. It means using the clear days and the blue skies to strengthen our ability *not* to be afraid in the clouds...not to be afraid of the dark, dense fog we are certain to pass through from time to time.

You see, fear will lead you to say and do things that are *beneath* your true self. Fear will make you react to things in ways that are beneath your belovedness. Fear will make you say and do things that are destructive—to yourself and to others.

Faith, on the other hand, is this hidden muscle which gives you the strength and courage to seek, serve, and follow Jesus Christ—in *the sunshine and in the clouds*. So, choose faith, even though fear is easier. Practice faith, even though *not* practicing is easier. Exercise your faith—your God-given muscle of trust which makes it possible to carry on—rain *or* shine, light *or* darkness.

The truth for Moses on Mount Sinai... and the truth for St. Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration...is that God was there all along. Invisible in the dark, dense fog? *Yes*. Mysteriously present in the dark, dense fog? *Absolutely*. That is the nature of the love of God—compassionately present in dazzling glory *and* in foggy obscurity.

Slowly, slowly, I began to pedal down Mikel Lane. I remained cautious, of course, but as I rode along, I realized I could remember more about the twists and turns in the road than I first *thought I could*. I might have to go slow at first, but I trusted I would make my way home in spite of the dark, dense fog.

And you will too! If you cannot yet trust yourself, then try to begin by trusting the love of God—the love that is around you and the love implanted deep within you. Maybe it seems more obscure than you would like, as it must have seemed to Moses. Maybe it seems more frightening than you would like, as it certainly did for St. Peter.

Trust it anyway, because love is the most powerful, creative, redeeming, and sustaining force in all of creation. As St. Peter wrote in the epistle lesson we just heard this morning. “*Be attentive to this* as to a lamp shining in a dark place.” We can certainly trust that St. Peter wrote those very words, having had the same kinds of doubts and fears that we do.

So, be attentive to the opportunities you have to exercise your faith when skies are blue. And you will be ok, when the clouds roll in.

This morning we prayed at the beginning of this liturgy that we might (quote) “...behold—*by faith*—the light of Christ’s countenance so that we might be strengthened to bear our cross...*that is*—to persevere in clouds and darkness...and (then) ultimately—to be *changed into* Christ’s (own) likeness...from glory to glory.

Amen.