

St. John's Parish, Clayton, CA
Sunday, Feb. 3, 2008

Sermon by Pastor Jim Stickney

Lord, it is good for us to be here!

This Sunday we conclude the green season of Epiphany in our church year. The season of Epiphany is a sequence of manifestations, of *showings forth*: 12th night, the arrival of the Magi from the East; the Baptism of Jesus by John; Jesus first miracles, first healing, and first teachings – all are manifestations. Transfiguration signifies the clearest manifestation of who Christ is, short of Easter.

Our first reading from the Book of Exodus gives a background to our Gospel. Moses goes up on the mountain, to receive the Covenant Law, and to find God. For six days the cloud covered the mountain; on the seventh Moses goes up. The appearance of God was like fire on the mountain, cutting through the cloud. Moses stayed there for 40 days and 40 nights (more about that next Sunday).

Our Gospel reading begins “six days later.” *What happened* 6 days earlier? It was Peter's statement of faith, that Jesus was the Messiah, God's Anointed; and then Jesus' rebuke about the true nature of being a Messiah who would suffer. So, six days later Jesus climbs a new Mount Sinai to bring a New Covenant. He was transfigured before them: a new fire on the mountain, as his face shone. Moses and Elijah conversed with him – the living Law and the Prophets.

I find it fascinating that the figure of Christ Jesus is located exactly in the center between structure and energy, right between the weight of tradition and the ecstatic utterances that can't be generated by any legalism. Here Moses and Elijah are not only getting along, as different as they are, but their contrasting gifts have a common focus in the person of Christ Jesus.

How much today's Christians and today's church need to embrace both! Some of us are better at institutional memory, at keeping structures vibrant. As a choir director once told me, he wanted to make the music live today the same way it vibrated when the music was first created and sung centuries ago. Others among us are better at the creative gesture, looking to what's new, finding the creative in what others take to be mere chaos. Innovators, visionaries, poets and artists following a muse, prophets speaking the truth to power,

All of you have had some peak experience, a hint of transfiguration of your life, and can recall some time and place where it all came together for you. Perhaps it took place in nature, upon some lofty vista-rich mountain peak. Maybe it took place in a lush green valley, or by the crashing ocean surf. Perhaps you found God in a grand cathedral or a quiet church. I

invite you to pause right here and now for a moment, and recall some place that is sacred to you, holy to you. For a moment recall a place where you feel in touch with your deepest self & with the God who made you and loves you.

Lord, it is good for us to be here!

Like many of you, I've been to a mountaintop; not as lofty as Martin Luther King's, It's not remote, but it takes cross-country skiing and stamina to get there. I've been there with a heavy heart and an **earnest prayer** for clarity within, even though from outside things probably looked all right to other people. I've been there with a light heart and **earnest thanks** for clarity within, even though from outside things might look broken and confused to others. *Lord, it was good for me to be there!* I felt no need to build booths or monuments. I carry that mountaintop experience around with me, and I can return there in my imagination anytime I need to, especially when I seek the quiet of prayer. I've heard people talk about the trick of *location therapy*, that it's just not necessary to leave where we are right now, to enjoy the renewal of some special place. A moment ago we all paused and revisited some special sacred place in our minds. We can go there in our imaginations, and we find there an ideal place.

Who knows — some day, I will not be able to return to that physical mountaintop. The ski company might be out of business; or too much (too little!) snow. Some day my body will run down to the point where I can't exert that much energy. What's really important about that place is not some arrangement of nature, but what that memory triggers within me, spiritually! **That** I can renew anytime, with much less spiritual effort than it takes to get there physically!

And yet something spiritually greedy in us wants to own and control the experience. Six days before, Peter got it half right & half wrong; Jesus was the Messiah, but this new kind of Messiah would not avoid suffering on his way to Easter. On this mountain Peter gets it halfway right: Lord, it is good for us to be here. But there's no need of structures or monuments for each spiritual peak experience.

A bright cloud overshadows them — a voice tells Peter to stop babbling: just take in this extraordinary experience without putting it into words or stone. "This is my Son, my Beloved; with him I am well pleased; **listen to him.**" Since this church has people who have experienced some personal transfiguration, then taken together that means that all of us together, as a church, can bear witness to transfiguration. All the things we think are ordinary in this place are being shot through with divine light — if only we could truly see it! What seems mundane, tarnished or shoddy is actually carrying divinity right now!

Yes, I'm daring to speak of this parish church of St. John's in Clayton! We are being transfigured. The opaque images we think ourselves to be are gradually being illumined, as if a light is shining from behind us. And what other people may be beginning to see is not our

little worries or mistakes, but exactly those precious qualities and triumphs and insights and courage which we achieved because we walk in the steps, not only of Moses and Elijah, but in the steps of divinity made human, Christ Jesus our Savior!

Lord, it is good for us to be here!