

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Epiphany

February 15, 2026

The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney

Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Exodus 24:12-18

Psalm 99

2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

There is something special about living amidst the mountains.
Mountaintop experiences are only supposed to happen – sometimes.
But living here, where we are surrounded by mountains
they happen all of the time.

Just yesterday morning,
my wife and I were on our usual walk in the pre-dawn quiet.
The clouds were covering the eastern foothills.
Most of the world was still that early gray following the rain.
We could see the snow on the Jemez, and as we walked westward, the snow-covered peaks
were gradually illuminated from above
until the white of the snow glowed
amidst the gray clouds above and below.

Today's readings are about mountaintop experiences.
That's the season that ends today.
Epiphany – the manifestation of the divine.

The people of Israel witness the manifestation
of God's glory as "a devouring fire."
And Peter and James and John witness the manifestation
as their rabbi is transfigured into glory, six days later.

Six days.
What's so important about six days.
Moses waits on the mountain for six days – alone,
waiting for God to give him the Law.
Six days later, Jesus goes up on the mountain.
And here we are six Sundays later
at the end of the season after the Epiphany.

Six is a special number in Jewish mysticism.
The star of David has six points.
Six represents the physical world.
It was on the Sixth Day that God created the higher forms of life, including human beings.

Six represents the six directions: north, south, east, west, up, down.
And perhaps most significantly,
Six signifies preparation for receiving divine light.

It was the divine light of the Law of God
for which Moses spent six days waiting,
and it was on sixth day Jesus' three friends followed him
into the divine light of the Transfiguration.

“Six days later...” the Gospel begins.
So what happened six days before Jesus took Peter, James, and John to the mountaintop?

Jesus and the twelve are in the region of Caesarea Philippi,
which is north of the Sea of Galilee and way north of Jerusalem. They're just walking along
and Jesus asks them:
“Who do people say that I am?”

The disciples quote others:
Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah
or one of the prophets.
But Jesus doesn't want to hear outside opinions from influencers. “But who do YOU say
that I am?”

It is Simon, the bumbling Galilean, who gets it right:
“You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”
And Jesus, probably smiling, responds:
“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!
For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you,
but my Father in heaven.
And I tell you, you are Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

The glory of the moment, however, was fleeting.
As they journey on their way south,
Jesus begins to teach them how he will suffer and die in Jerusalem and be raised on the third
day.
Peter is having none of it.
“God forbid it! This must not happen.”

And that draws one of Jesus' strongest rebukes:
“Get thee behind me Satan!
You are a stumbling block to me;
for you are setting your mind not on divine things
but on human things.”

It's not that absurd an expectation on Peter's part,
considering the times of Roman oppression.

I am convinced that when Simon called Jesus the Messiah,
his understanding was that of most Jews at that time:
the Messiah would come in great glory
and throw off the oppressors of God's people.
The Messiah would be the King of the Jews,
a warrior in the line of David
to lift up Israel to rule itself again.

The transfiguration, then, may have been a demonstration,
a way of convincing Peter and James and John
the Kingdom was not of this Earth,
and the Messiah they thought they wanted
is not the Messiah intended by God the Father.

This is it – at the end of Epiphany.
No longer the witness of shepherds or magi of a birth
foretold by the voices of angels and the movement of stars,
but the witness of three men standing with their teacher.
They hear again what was said at the baptism:
“This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased.”
And there comes the admonition: “Listen to him!”

And in the Epistle, Peter pleads with his people.
“I am not making this stuff up.
I was there with his disciples.
We saw this with our own eyes,
we heard this with our own ears.
This is the truth.
God spoke to Jesus and we heard it.”

It is the glory of God resting on the shoulders of the man
who taught the disciples to be better human beings,
and God adds: “listen to him.”

In three days we will observe Ash Wednesday
as we enter the 40 days of Lent.
This time in the wilderness need not be a time of darkness. Remember, after six days of
waiting,
Moses moved into the light and spent 40 days in the divine presence.

Moses was leading the people of the Exodus, a journey
from the darkness of enslavement to the promise of tomorrow.
It would take forty years.

Nearly 60 years ago, another Moses told of his mountaintop.

On the night before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reflected on dark days from Exodus to the struggles of his day.

We are again living in dark times. Angers and resentments abound. The rule of Law, once taken for granted, again seems uncertain.

Dr. King concluded his speech with the promise of tomorrow.

“We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”¹

We are called to do God's will. We are called to remember.

There was once a Rabbi who walked with his followers
despite the oppression and opposition that surrounded them.
Theirs was the glory, the light, the hope of the world,
and it is ours to hold onto and cherish
as we await the bright light of Easter morning.

And know this: He is with us still.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.afscme.org/about/history/mlk/mountaintop>