

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

February 15, 2026 – LAST AFTER THE EPIPHANY, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*A Glorious Sneak-Preview*”

Old Testament	Exodus 24:12-18	(The glory of the Lord is revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai)
Psalter	Psalms 99	(God spoke to His people out of a pillar of cloud)
Epistle	2 Peter 1:16-21	(Peter witnesses to hearing God's voice on the mountain)
Gospel	St. Matthew 17:1-9	(Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop)

How many of you enjoy a good mystery story? If your favorite character is walking into doom, do you get nervous? Are you the kind of reader who will skip to the last chapter and make sure everything's okay before you go on? If so, do you bother to read the rest of the book after that? Sometimes, we can guess how the end will unfold, depending on how far we are into the book. But we still read the rest, because there are character developments and nuances we might otherwise miss, which make the conclusion even more meaningful and fully understood. The work of living out the story with the characters must be done, not despite—but *because*—we had that brief flash of discerning the ending in the middle of the story.

What if you were reading and learned that the main character dies a horrible death, only to flip ahead and read the final pages—scanning quickly, of course—and discover the person is alive and well? Was their death a trick? A dream? The intrigue might motivate you to read more.¹

Now, imagine that you are with Jesus' closest disciples—Peter, James, and John—as they hike up a mountain with Him, most likely Mount Tabor. In Jewish tradition, when a person climbs a mountain, it is almost guaranteed they will have some sort of Divine encounter. Think of Moses on Mount Sinai, as he encountered God and received the 10 Commandments, or Elijah, who met the Lord atop Mount Horeb.

Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured before you, shining in dazzling white clothes—a symbol of a heavenly figure from God. Could this be a sneak preview of the end of the story, given to us in the middle? Is Jesus showing Himself as He will be *after* the resurrection? Possibly. But the disciples aren't thinking about that at all. They don't know what is to come and are completely thrown into terror.

Madeleine L'Engle, the well-known author of *A Wrinkle in Time* and many other books, was for more than 30 years the librarian for the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. (Incidentally, that's where I was confirmed into The Episcopal Church.) She also wrote and traveled occasionally while raising three children with her husband, Hugh Franklin. On one of their journeys, she visited Egypt and asked the guide why there were so many vultures, crocodiles, and cobras depicted on temples. The guide told her it was because the Egyptians worshiped what they feared. What an interesting statement: “They worshiped what they feared.”

Fear and confusion are sometimes precursors to transformation, but such responses don't always lead to renewal and change. If we become mired in our fear and anxiety, we cannot be transformed, and if we worship what we fear, we will certainly remain stuck. Fear tends to drive people back to the certainty of what is most familiar, rather than toward something new and possibly challenging.

When we fear, the world before us shrinks. It becomes as small and inaccessible as a clearing on a mountain top. Transformation cannot happen when our brains are reacting in the flight, fight, or freeze mode, because the focus becomes on surviving, not thriving. We are wary of being in a genuine relationship—with God or anyone else. When our brains shut down from fear and anxiety, we are also closed to new possibilities, particularly that of being transfigured by Christ so that we may be made more whole.

The Bible has quite a collection of stories that can make one person believe in the wonder of God and His part in our universe, as well as stories that can make another person run the other way in dread. The stories we've heard today from Exodus and the Gospel are two that we often don't know what to do with because they are so wild and wonderful.

To force the language of literalism on them, or to fear them, tames and restricts the message God has for us in them. These stories witness to what gives meaning to our lives. As Madeleine L'Engle once wrote, "The brilliance of God is indeed blinding, and we need myth [and] story, to help us bear the light."²

When Elijah and Moses appear during the moment of Jesus' Transfiguration—the two giants from Hebrew tradition who also suffered in service to God—the disciples become flustered. They don't know how to respond. In Jewish culture, both Moses and Elijah were seen as figures who conquered death. They believed Elijah would come back at the end of time, and since no one knew where Moses was buried, legend grew that he, too, would return. And here they were, standing on either side of Jesus! Did this signify the world was ending? What could it mean that Jesus is talking with them? Will Jesus will have a similar fate? Peter makes the suggestion of building three shelters so they can all stay there. He wants to capture and prolong this holy moment: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here... ."

Is it? Is it good for *us* to be here? To remain here, on the mountain, while the world passes by below? How often do we want to hold on to a "mountaintop experience" or a "God moment"? We hold tight to those instances of pure and utter bliss or moments of extreme holiness. But when we fixate on a particular time or experience—especially those which are fleeting—we can miss God's purpose. We can become like the creature Gollum from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series, who wanted to keep the one powerful ring to himself—his "Precious." We want to keep our "precious" experiences in our possession; yet by doing so, we risk excluding everything else and becoming stunted and miserable like Gollum.

What was "good" for a moment becomes stale and eventually poisons us—like fruit rotting on the vine—if we don't allow these good things to be shared with others who need uplifting. This is true of many aspects of our lives: church, work (or retirement), and relationships. It is good for us to be here right now, yes. But it is even better to come away, go back down the mountain, equipped with fresh knowledge and joy to share with others.

For the disciples and Jesus to stay on the mountain would have been detrimental to the rest of the Gospel story. The disciples don't want to believe that Jesus will suffer and die, yet that is what must happen for our salvation and in order for Jesus to be glorified after the resurrection. As He previously told His disciples, the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be killed, but He will be raised again after three days.

When the cloud covers the mountain and God says to them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" it makes the subsequent failings of the disciples (and our own) all the more poignant. James and John arguing about who will sit at Jesus' right hand; Peter's three-fold denial; all of them falling asleep when Jesus needed them to pray with Him at Gethsemane; and *every one of them* fleeing after His arrest. They don't seem to understand that the price of taking on Jesus' mantle is suffering. Do *we*?

For Jesus, there is no glory without suffering, and there cannot be resurrection without death. There is no miracle of life without the miracle of death. Therefore we must experience death—death to ourselves; to our sins; and to the world; in order to experience life, and life eternal. Lent is coming, and will provide us with a time for such self-examination and repentance.

We have all had spiritual highs—at retreats, church camp, baptisms, weddings, funerals, during the Eucharist or special prayer times—and our compulsion can be to want to keep things as they are. It is a very human thing to want that. However, we worship a God who is always doing *new things*, and that means *change*. Jesus' call to us is one of *action*. Don't stay on the mountain. Don't build shelters there. Instead, go back down the mountain, back into civilization, and back to the broken world in need of mercy, love, and healing—that is, the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are to carry our transfiguration moments—our God moments—with us, to remind us why we are on this journey, especially when things become difficult. Like Peter, James, and John, we may not always understand what we have experienced, but we trust that we are loved and called by God who shares His Spirit with us to equip us for the journey. As we prepare to enter the spiritual wilderness of Lent, we already know how this story ends. The story of Jesus requires us to take the brilliance of the Transfiguration into our own journeys, so that God can give *our* ending meaning.

Today is the final Sunday in Epiphany, a season that has been about seeing who we really are in the light of Christ, and letting Christ lead us into that abundant life that is full of God’s love. One thing the Transfiguration makes clear is that we are not God. But as we prepare to walk the days of Lent, seeing our humanness—good and bad—we have the light of the Transfiguration to remind us of who God is.³

We have three more days before Lent begins, and during this time I invite you to dwell and meditate on the mysterious light of God in our lives and world. This is the light that will sustain us through Lent and get us to the glory of Easter.

May God grant us the courage and openness to be transformed, so that we might bear the light and grace of God to others, setting the whole world aglow. May we become, as Second Peter 1:9 declares: “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts.” *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. Danae Ashley, “How the Story Ends,” TheEpiscopalChurch.org., [Sermons that Work](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/how-the-story-ends-last-sunday-after-the-epiphany-a-february-15-2026/), <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/how-the-story-ends-last-sunday-after-the-epiphany-a-february-15-2026/> 9 February 2026.

² Used with permission.

³ Qtd. *Ibid.*

³ Adapt. Shawna Atteberry, “Transfiguration Sunday: A Glimpse of God,” 2 February 2008, [ShawnaAtteberry.com](https://www.shawnaatteberry.com/2008/02/transfiguration-sunday-a-glimpse-of-god/) <https://www.shawnaatteberry.com/2008/02/transfiguration-sunday-a-glimpse-of-god/> 10 February 2026.