

Last Sunday after The Epiphany
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on February 15, 2026

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

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Human beings. We have this strong urge to put everything we encounter into a box. And as Jesus is transfigured before him, that's exactly what Peter wants to do:

I will make 3 dwellings here, 1 for you, 1 for Moses, and 1 for Elijah.

In the previous chapter of Matthew, the Disciples were told by Jesus that:

He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the 3rd day be raised.

That's must have been a lot to take in, so I can kind of understand that Peter might have had a knee-jerk reaction and wanted to keep Jesus with him. But there is a broader tendency for humans to want to put things into boxes. We want to contain in order to understand and in order to control outcomes. I think this tendency is a problem for our daily living *and* a problem for our relationship with Jesus and our faith practice.

Sometimes as Christians – evident in how we talk about Jesus, evident in sermons, evident in how we celebrate high holy days – sometimes as Christians we focus on the historical Jesus of Nazareth, the character we meet in scripture. We scrutinize the text, we hypothesize emotional and psychological motivations, we explore the cultural and historical context of Jesus' words and actions. That is absolutely fascinating! When I read scripture along with the commentaries that

have explored the context, I often go down rabbit holes thinking I will discover the truth of the exact scene as if it were a Hollywood film. And certainly, Hollywood has attempted to do that, most recently with the Amazon Prime production “The Chosen” and its 5 seasons, and the Fox docudrama “Crown of Thorns”.

When we engage in Bible Study, either individually or together, that’s what we are doing: we are identifying with the historical Jesus and building an understanding and relationship with the historical Jesus in order to shape our faith.

Sometimes as Christians – as evidenced in how we talk about our spirituality – sometimes as Christians we focus on the Christ among us. Some of us feel the presence of Christ or God when going through challenging times of our lives, or we feel the power of the Holy Spirit when experiencing amazing and unbelievable events in our lives. When we pray privately, we address the Jesus who is somewhere in the room. When we worship together we invoke the name of Christ in our prayers, and Christ is made known to us in the breaking of the bread. And we know it to be true that:

*“Where two or three are gathered in my name,” says the Lord,
“I am there among them.” [Matt 18.20]*

Then, when we’re feeling that the Christ among us is a bit too remote, we pivot back to the historical Jesus. We pick up our Bible and think, “*What would Jesus do?*” Our Bibles help us put Jesus into a nice, neat box that is understandable and will help us control the outcomes in our lives.

The mountaintop story from Exodus illustrates that dichotomy, too. Moses goes up to the mountain to be with God. When Moses comes down the mountain, that’s *exactly* what the people do: they build a box to put God into. They build the Ark of the Covenant in the very next chapter. Sure, it’s at God’s request, but it’s really so the people can better understand their relationship with God and control

that relationship. Instead of feeling the presence of God all around them, flowing down from the mountaintop, God, gets put into a box.

One of the Epiphany Prefaces for the Eucharist is:

*In [Jesus] we see our God made visible
and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.*

The Incarnation and the writers of the Gospels made God much more tangible. And while Jesus is part of the Godhead, and we sometimes struggle with how the Godhead is present, the Jesus in scriptures makes God somewhat visible. Jesus in scripture is a comfortable place to be. Being with Jesus on a mountaintop has too much uncertainty and requires too much trust.

Maybe we're afraid of where the God on the mountaintop or the Christ among us will take us. If we get too "*caught up in the love of the God we cannot see*", maybe we will end up in unexpected places. Maybe we'll end up volunteering too much at church, or starting a charity, or becoming a priest! Because that's what happens to people who chase after the God on the mountaintop or the Christ among us! The Jesus *in scriptures* is only asking the handful of people around Him to do unachievable things, to give up all that they have, to take up their cross and follow Him. He's not asking that of *me!*

Yet, here we are, journeying with Jesus every Sunday and hopefully the days in between. We have chosen to follow His bursting into our world in the most dramatic yet most humble way. God coming into the world – the only word to describe it is cataclysmic! And many of our Christmas tunes exemplify that energy: *O Come All Ye Faithful, Hark! The Herald Angels Sing* and of course *Joy to the World!* But God came into the world as a homeless baby born in a cattle stall. It's too much to get our heads around, yet, here we are on this journey.

On Wednesday, we will start this journey with Jesus that takes us to places of repentance and forgiveness, places of solitude and self-examination, places that

might make us feel shame. We *could* be out on the golf course, or at a grandkid's soccer game, or on a cruise. But we have committed to this journey, a journey that will take us to the gruesome Crucifixion and Death of Jesus, who is the God we cannot see. We choose to ritually and publicly celebrate Jesus' Death in a way we don't even do for our closest of loved ones. Yet, here we are on this journey. And as if the depth of our sadness was not enough emotion to bear, we are risen with Jesus in His Resurrection to new life, which is *our* resurrection to new life.

Today, we take this journey with Jesus to the mountaintop. On that mountaintop, we have the opportunity to stand in the presence of the magnitude of God's glory! We have the opportunity to see where that endless expanse of Divine Energy leads us! Are we going to take that opportunity, or are we going to say, *Jesus, let's put You over here so we know where You are forever?*

What we discover in the story of The Transfiguration and in the story of Moses on the Mountaintop is a God that cannot be put into a box, yet a God who is intimately close. God is both transcendent and imminent. God is too big to be contained, yet God is contained in the Bread and Wine of the Sacrament.

We humans don't like extremes. But how we weigh the Historical Jesus in scripture and the Christ among us is like Pandora's Box. If we leave Jesus in the Bible, everything is fine and dandy. If we put ourselves into the Bible stories of Jesus, if we apply the intensity of the Jesus in those stories to the Christ among us, then who knows what will happen!

God is far beyond us, the Divine Realm is not within our control. Life coaches, teachers and therapists tell people regularly:

You can't control what other people do; but you can control how you respond.

We cannot control the vastness or the closeness of God. We cannot control what God is calling us to do. We cannot put God in a box. But we *can* control how we respond to God, to God's love, to God's call.

We have chosen to be on this journey of polar opposites because:

*In [Jesus] we see our God made visible
and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.*

There is so much in our lives that we have not allowed God to tap into. As created in the image of God, there exists in each of you the vastness of God's power *along with* the intimacy of God's love. When we read these stories, it's easy to put God into a box and think: *That's my God doing great things! Amen!* It's entirely different to read these stories and think: *That's God in my life, and God is calling me to some amazing work!*

Can we hold the two in tension to have an ever-stronger relationship with Christ and deeper engagement with prayer and worship which can lead to an ever-deepening relationship with God? Can we learn to avoid trying to fit everything into boxes and deal with the uncertainty *or* – better yet – live with the truth that the job of defining isn't always ours? Or does the Christ among us, the Jesus on the mountaintop cause us to tremble in fear like Peter, James and John? Theology professor Douglas John Hall reminds us that the historical Jesus in the scriptures and the Christ among us can only be one and the same:

'The Christ of faith' always leads again to the 'Jesus of history' – that is, to Him who 'was crucified, dead, and buried,' and whose anointing entailed a 'descent into hell' before it could sit Him down at the right hand of God.

In other words: we can't have the Christ among us, the one to whom we pray in the silence of our bedrooms or who is known to us in the breaking of the bread, without the Jesus about whom we read in the Bible. We can't have one without

the other because the Jesus in the Bible had to suffer all that we read about in order to ascend to Heaven, in order to be able to look down upon us. Just as the Historical Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the Christ among us is both intimately close and unrestrainedly transcendent. We cannot control how and why this is, but we can control how we respond to it.

Each time we open the Bible, each time we hear the words of Jesus on Sunday mornings, can we go deeper into our relationship with Jesus and see where He is leading us on our journey of faith? Be led up to the top of that mountain with Jesus and experience as much of the totality of His power and love – and brave bring transformed into His likeness by His glory. Each time you read or hear the stories of Jesus, do all in your might to: *Listen to Him!*