This last Friday morning I was on the eighth floor of Children’s Hospital in Aurora. I was there because one of our youth was beginning a multi-day stay to receive a series of drug infusions to help curb a persistent problem with migraine headaches. Both she and her mom had told me that this problem with migraines had been a persistent issue, but that the pain levels (and the accompanying inability to function at school) had increased in the last several months. They had tried multiple different treatments to solve the problem, but none had been significantly helpful over the long term. Their hope is that this treatment would be successful.

While my family’s medical situations have been different, I could easily identify with mom and daughter; I think most of us who are parents can. Whether it’s comforting a child who is suffering from an extreme allergic reaction, or sitting in an emergency room wondering about the severity of an injury, none of us want our children to suffer—for any length of time. We can see the look of helplessness in their eyes, and we’ll do almost anything we can to ease that pain. And, when we find ourselves equally helpless, it’s agonizing!

Imagine, then, the agony of the man at the end of today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke! This poor father had a son who—in the eyes of many contemporary scholars—suffered from epilepsy, afflicted by occasional Grand Mal seizures. The father had probably heard about Jesus, perhaps the casting out of the demons into the pigs, or the raising of Jairus’ daughter, or the feeding of the five thousand. And so he joined the crowd of those, hoping that the prophet from Nazareth could do something for his son. Imagine his frustration when he arrived and Jesus wasn’t there! He was off on some trip up a mountain. Yes, a number of his disciples were present, but they were incapable of helping, although not for want of trying. When Jesus finally did come down the mountain, the man had to shout to get his attention. Fortunately, despite some apparent frustration on his part, Jesus called the man and boy to him, rebuked the demon, and restored the boy to his father, healed. To the man and his son, the Realm of God had been made real. And all who were there were astounded!
The Realm of God breaking into our earthly existence is at the core of Luke’s Gospel. You’ll remember that Jesus claimed that this would be his mission from the very outset. As we heard several weeks ago, Luke wrote of Jesus reading from the prophet Isaiah, and claiming that Isaiah’s words were being fulfilled in his audience’s hearing. Those words?

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Lk 4.18)

And in the weeks since then—or, at least, in the chapters between that reading and today’s—Jesus made real that claim. As he told some of John the Baptist’s disciples: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them” (Lk 7.22). The time of Jubilee has arrived! The Kingdom of God is now!

Between Jesus’ report to John, and his encounter with the man and his epileptic son, however, Jesus did go up that mountain and there was Transfigured—an amazing account of the in-breaking of the realm of God. At the top of a mountain, Jesus encountered, in the presence of his inner core of disciples—in some mysterious way—the two most significant figures from Israel’s past: Moses and Elijah. Moses and Elijah may have represented “Law” and “Prophets”—which the Gospel, then, fulfilled. Or they might have been, like Jesus, representatives of God who the people of their time rejected, the encounter drawing Jesus into that Godly circle. Despite divided scholarly opinion on the story, it seems to me that these two towering figures represented the intent of God’s will for God’s people . . . that is, that God’s realm was one in which wholeness for all was the norm. Or, to refer to the situations with which I began, God’s realm is one in which all of God’s children have good news, good health, given them.

Regardless of who, or what, Moses and Elijah represented on the mountain of Transfiguration, what the story does tell us is that Peter was so transfixed by
the experience that he wanted to build “tents” so that they all could remain. As most of us know, who live in the shadow of the one of the greatest mountain ranges in the world, “mountain top experiences” tempt us to prolong the moment; I am certainly loathe to leave Rocky Mountain National Park. And I’ve been reluctant to leave places of, what I might call, “spiritual clarity”. And Peter was no different.

That mountain must have been amazing! The privilege of being there, seeing Moses and Elijah, and then hearing the voice from the cloud: “This is my son, my Chosen; listen to him” (9.35) —what an experience! Who wouldn’t want to set up camp and stay as long as possible! Who knows what more might happen? Yet, as soon as the voice came from the cloud, the whole scenario changed: the cloud and Moses and Elijah were gone, and the disciples were stunned into silence. But that wasn’t the end of the story.

The danger suggested by all of the mountains that Moses, Elijah and Jesus ascended was that danger to stay — to remain in the safe, yet awesome, presence of God; to remain removed from the messy realities of their missions. The stories of all three, however, did not end on the mountain; God pushed them down the hill. Moses needed to descend Mt. Sinai to deliver the Law to Israelites who needed guidance as they journeyed to their promised land. Elijah had to go down Mt. Horeb, both to anoint kings to further God’s plan and to appoint Elisha as his successor in fulfilling that plan. And Jesus had to descend Mt. Hermon, ultimately to go up to Mt. Zion—the mount of crucifixion. Jesus couldn’t stay on the mountain and still fulfill his mission. And, regardless of their beauty or awesomeness, we can’t stay on the mountains.

We cannot retreat from, or hide from, the rest of world we inhabit. As Jesus’ transfiguration empowered and equipped him to go down the mountain and, as Luke tells us a few verses later, “set his face towards Jerusalem” (9.51), our individual “transfigurations”—for that is what our baptisms imply—equip us to carry the gospel back into real life. We are charged to participate with Jesus in the continual inauguration of Jubilee, to make real the Realm, the Kingdom, of God.

Our experiences here at church, or elsewhere in our spiritual life, are not the destination. We are called to something more. It doesn’t take much to see, if we just look around. There are, outside these doors, multitudes of people clamoring to be fed, shouting for healing, hoping for Good News; there are issues aplenty that require transfigured believers to act. We see anger and confusion over summit conferences and nuclear proliferation. We want to be able make
sense of courtroom and congressional hearings. We see Christian bodies pass legislation that prevents certain God’s beloved from receiving the benefits easily accessible to others. We watch corporate interests threaten beautiful, one-of-a-kind, natural resources. So, who wouldn’t want to stay, safe, on the mountain?

But God’s children are in pain. Despite Jesus’ apparent wish that he was still up on that mountain, given his cry of exasperation, “How much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” (7.41), his compassion won him over. As he had done throughout his ministry, he stopped what he was doing, and helped the ones in need. No doubt empowered by his experience on Mt. Hermon, he realized that his call to redeem God’s children meant, yes, setting his face towards Jerusalem, but also tending to those who needed more immediate assistance.

We here, hopefully, are “transfigured” by our experiences in church and prayer, changed and empowered to address the needs set before us. We are called, as was Jesus, to “set our face towards Jerusalem”, to engage in the process of “restoring all people to unity with God and each other in Christ”, as our Prayer Book puts it (p. 855). We will, as individuals with unique gifts and interests, do it differently. But it is incumbent upon us to leave the mountain and venture into the crowd. What might the “in-breaking Realm of God” look like for each of us?

For me, I have long-term commitments to social justice and environmental issues. Goodness knows that there’s plenty to do in those areas, and I do what I can when I can. But today, however, I’ll act more immediately, and get back on the snowy roads and head to the eighth floor of Children’s Hospital this afternoon, taking the resources of the Church and Jesus’ care to one of God’s hurting, beloved.

Amen.