Mountains… They hold a special place in our shared consciousness. We think of mountains as a place where we can connect with creation… where we can be introspective and learn about ourselves… a place to become wise. Whenever I read Psalm 121 – (a psalm that will be in Bit’s funeral this week) – I envision myself standing high on a mountaintop, looking out at a view that seems to go on forever… and finding God.: “…I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”+++ +++ Of course, this connection between mountains and wisdom, or enlightenment, has made its way into our popular culture as well. One of my favorites is in the comic strip “Ziggy,” when Ziggy occasionally climbs to the top of the highest mountain to ask the wise old sage there to explain the meaning of life… Have you seen those? In one, the sage responds, “If you have to ask the meaning of life, my son – you can’t afford it.”+++ And another, “The meaning of life?!??? Don’t get me started…!!”+++ I remember once when the sage tried to be reassuring:: “There are no stupid questions, my son… except for the ones stupid people ask, of course!”++++++ I think one of the most powerful popular treatments of the inspiring power of the mountains is in John Denver’s song, “Rocky Mountain High.” It tells the story of a young man who found no meaning in life – until he left everything behind and retreated into the mountains. There On the Mountain – Between his Past and his Future, he learned to stop… and listen… for grace… - and life came into focus for him as it never had before.++++++ Here are a few lines from the song::: “He was born in the summer of his 27th year. Coming home to a place he’d never been before. He left yesterday behind him, you might say he was born again. You might say he found a key for every door… When he first came to the mountains his life was far away. On the road and hanging by a song… He climbed cathedral mountains, he saw silver clouds below he saw everything as far as you can see… Now he walks in quiet solitude the forest and the streams, Seeking grace in every step he takes. His sight has turned inside himself to try and understand the serenity of a clear blue mountain lake.”++++++ The power of a mountain … it brings the past and the future together – to help make sense of all the stuff that swirls in between.

Moses and Elijah had each intimately learned about the grace and power of God on the top of Mount Horeb. There, Moses was first drawn to the Burning Bush and the Lord revealed God’s own name to him there, before sending him to free Israel from bondage. Moses returned to Horeb (also called Sinai) to receive the Law, and, in today’s reading, we learn that when he came back down the mountain after talking to God, Moses’ face was shining so brightly the people were afraid to come near him – and so Moses covered his face with a veil.++++++ Generations later, God draws Elijah to Mount Horeb “to stand before the Lord.” And Elijah found the Lord – not in a great wind that broke rock to pieces – not in an earthquake – and not in a fire. He found God after these things had passed, in the “sound… of sheer… silence.” Then, …on that mountaintop, …Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle …and stood …in the mouth of the cave where he had been hiding – and the voice of God spoke to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”++++++ The great Moses and Elijah – had each found the Glory of the Lord on the top of God’s Mountain – Mount Horeb.++++++ And now, in our gospel reading, they’ve returned …once again …to a mountaintop …to commune with the Lord.

Now Jesus, …in his turn, …leads Peter, John, and James up the mountain to witness his Transfiguration. On this unnamed mountain he reveals his glory to them in the presence of Elijah and Moses.++++++ This comes at a moment of deep transition for Jesus. He has just confirmed to his disciples something they had already come to believe – he is the Messiah. Then he had told them, “If any want to become my followers, let them… take up their cross and …follow me.”++++++ Now… here… on the mountaintop, …the beginning of Jesus’ ministry comes to an end – and the end of it begins.++++++ The voice of God reconnects us to Jesus’ baptism, again speaking from a cloud, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” But when Peter and the others listen – listen to Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah – the topic is different from anything they’ve heard him say before. Now, he is talking about his departure.++++++ This brings up something important Luke tells us that’s missing in the other gospel accounts of the Transfiguration.++++++ Matthew and Mark just tell us that Jesus is “talking with” Elijah and Moses – but Luke actually tells us what they were talking ABOUT::: Luke writes that they were “speaking of his
departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” … There’s a couple important things we can take from that… First, is that Christ will soon depart… But, the Greek word Luke uses here, the word translated as “departure,” is _exodos_, which does, in a sense, mean “departure” but not a _final_ departure like when something is coming to an end. _Exodos_ is a particular _kind_ of departure – and Luke’s readers would immediately recognize that it’s the word they used for _The Exodus_, when Moses led Israel out of bondage. So, from the beginning, we know that this departure, however it actually happens, will not be the _END_ of something :: it’s a _transition_ to _freedom_ :: And this time, _Jesus_ will be forging a path for God’s people to follow him through their own wilderness …and into the _Promised Land_. +++ +++ The _other_ thing we notice is that this departure is something _he_ is about to _accomplish_ at Jerusalem. +++ It will not be something that will be done TO him beyond his own control – Jesus will not be a victim of this departure. +++ He will _accomplish_ it. +++ It will be a _victory_.

And shortly after the Transfiguration, we read that “when the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” From this moment on, everything Jesus does – every step he takes – _is leading to the cross_. +++ We can envision this mountain scene with other summits beckoning in the distance – on our left is Horeb, where God’s glory was revealed in ages past – and on our right is Calvary, where the cross will stand. +++ And right here – on this Mountain Between The Mountains – the true glory and power of Jesus Christ is revealed to _us_. +++ It’s fitting that this wonderful experience on the mountain ushers in Lent – a time of inward reflection – of self-discovery. Here on the mountaintop, we have a chance to _stop… and listen… for grace… and for our lives in Christ to come into focus as never before_. +++ In the weeks since Epiphany, we’ve talked about listening to God’s call on our lives, whatever it might be. And we’ve talked about being bold and confident in our ability to do it. +++ But, Peter’s reaction on the mountain balances our enthusiasm with a reminder to keep listening – to pay attention to what _God_ is doing before jumping in to solve the wrong problems. After letting his attention wander, lulled by sleepiness, Peter doesn’t take the time to really even see what’s happening before jumping into action – like a thoroughbred race horse chomping at the bits waiting for the gates to open. He wants to build tents so Jesus, Moses, and Elijah can stay together there on the mountain. +++ It was perfect timing when God’s voice came for the cloud, “This is my Son, my Chosen; _listen to him_!!” +++ Listen to him because _he is still speaking_! +++ +++ I think Peter is a lot like us – often thinking that faithfulness means we always have to _DO_ something – even if its based on just a little bit of information. But he was called up the mountain _just to SEE_ who Jesus Christ really _IS_ – to EXPERIENCE his glory – and to be strengthened by it when his _own_ work _really_ _does_ begin. +++ +++ And _that’s_ what Christ invites _YOU_ to do as we journey into Lent this week. In the middle of everything else that’s going on in your life – Jesus calls a timeout for you to stop what you are doing – to open up and be strengthened by his irresistible grace. +++ As in today’s epistle reading, Christ calls you to climb the mountain and be bold – bold enough to _NOT_ put a veil over your face for _protection from_ the glory of God, like Israel did when Moses returned to them glowing. +++ Instead, he welcomes you to _BASK_ in his glory.+++ +++ THE GOOD NEWS is that Christ _meets us_ here on the mountain – invites us to take a timeout between Epiphany and Lent – time to look back at where we’ve been, and time to look forward to where he is leading us – to his departure – his Exodus – leading us out of our bondage to _this_ world – bondage to sin – and into eternal freedom.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.