

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

February 15, 2025

From Mountaintop to Margins

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The allure of a mountaintop is undeniable. The air is crisp and clear, and the view extends for miles. Above the noise and chaos of the valley, everything appears to make sense. The perspective is both physically and spiritually breathtaking.

In Exodus 24, Moses ascends Mount Sinai, and the glory of the Lord settles on the mountain like a devouring fire. In Matthew 17, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain, and there his face shines like the sun, his clothes become dazzling, and the very presence of God overshadows them in a cloud. These are the moments we live for, those spiritual highs when God feels undeniable, when the divine breaks through and we are absolutely certain we are standing on holy ground.

Our initial instinct is often to preserve the moment, to capture it, or to construct something tangible in response. Peter, overwhelmed and perhaps terrified, blurts out: "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here" (Matthew 17:4). In today's world, this impulse might resemble snapping a selfie atop a breathtaking vista or hastily organizing a conference to capture a fleeting moment of inspiration. We want to build booths, erect monuments, construct memorials. We want to turn the transfiguration into an installation, the epiphany into an institution.

This connects directly to what we discussed last week: the danger of performative worship. Performative worship is our attempt to manufacture the mountaintop through spectacle and show. It is the human project of trying to capture glory for our own sake, to bottle the divine presence and put it on display, rather than being transformed by it. We would rather build booths than be changed. We would rather

construct monuments to the holy than let holiness reconstruct us. But God has other plans.

Peter is mid-sentence, mid-project, mid-plan. He's doing what we all do when confronted with the overwhelming presence of God: he's trying to *manage* it. When the divine becomes too much, too big, too undeniable, we reach for our tools. We make committees. We draft vision statements. We propose building campaigns. I, too, have found myself caught in this reflex. There have been times in my ministry when, faced with the enormity of God's call, I defaulted to organizing rather than listening. Perhaps, like me, you understand the comfort of structure over the vulnerability of open-hearted attention. This is a classic human defense mechanism. Surely God needs us to *do* something, right?

But before Peter can finish his proposal, God interrupts. “While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” (Matthew 17:5). The Divine Shush. Before Peter can *do* for God, he must *listen* to God.

This moment serves as the pivotal point of the Transfiguration narrative. It is not intended as a spectacle to be observed or a project to be managed, but as an authority to be acknowledged. The voice from the cloud does not instruct, 'This is my Son—build him a shrine.' Instead, it commands, 'This is my Son—listen to him.' Let us now take a moment to truly listen, allowing the silence to fill this space as we pause together, inviting God's voice into our hearts beyond words. [Pause]

Everything hinges on that command. Listen to him. Everything flows from that posture. Listen to him. Not perform for him. Listen to him. Not build for him. Listen to him. Not construct monuments in his name. Listen to him. So if the command is to listen, we must ask: what does Jesus say?

As they descend the mountain in Matthew 17:9, something remarkable happens. The glory doesn't disappear; it changes form. The devouring fire of Sinai, the radiant light of the Transfiguration, now walks on two legs down into the valley of human suffering. The glory of God that once filled the tabernacle and the temple now takes the form of a man walking toward Jerusalem, toward the cross, toward the places where people are broken and hungry and oppressed.

When we truly listen to Jesus—when we stop talking long enough to hear him—what do we hear? We hear the proclamation of the Kin-dom of God:

- Good news to the poor.
- Food for the hungry.
- Justice for the oppressed and liberation for the prisoner.
- Sight to the blind and freedom for the captive.

This is the message to which the voice from the cloud directs our attention. It is not a theology of comfort or a spirituality of escape; but a gospel that leads us from comfort to confrontation, moving persistently from the mountaintop to the margins.

Here is the divine paradox at the heart of our faith: the God of the mountaintop illustrates glory not by staying high, but by coming low. The One whose face shines like the sun chooses to meet us in the flesh, in the dirt, in the needs of the valley. The glory of God is revealed most fully not in the blinding light on the mountain, but in the embodied love in the valley, in the face of the leper touched, the child embraced, the woman forgiven, the prisoner visited. God's glory descends.

So we are called to listen. But listening is not passive; it is the most active thing we can do. And the call to listen is two-fold.

First, listen to Jesus: Effective love for our neighbor is not possible without first hearing the call of Christ. Without attentive listening to Jesus, acts of service risk becoming mere projects that serve personal interests, monuments to individual virtue, or attempts to manage the divine rather than be transformed by it. To ensure our service is truly centered on the needs of others, we should ask ourselves a simple diagnostic question: 'Whose story centers your service?' By frequently reflecting on this question, we can check our hearts and ensure our actions are guided by genuine love and empathy for others.

Listening to Jesus roots us. It orients us. It reminds us that the work of the Kin-dom is not about us looking good or feeling righteous. It's about embodying the love of the One who came down from the mountain to meet people in their pain.

Second, listen to your Neighbor: Once Jesus sends us out from the mountaintop, our next task is to listen to the world.

We do not approach our neighbors as experts or saviors equipped with predetermined solutions. Instead, we engage with open ears and open hearts. We must ask ourselves: What can I learn from my neighbor? In what ways does their story or their strength enrich my own understanding and growth? By recognizing the reciprocity in our interactions, we build bridges of empathy and understanding, giving and receiving in a shared journey of faith.

To serve someone authentically, we must understand their specific pain, their specific hunger, and their specific story. We must resist the temptation to impose our pre-packaged solutions, our neat three-point plans, our booths and monuments. Instead, we must ask: What do you need? What is your story? How can I walk with you?

This is the cycle of listening: to the Divine and then to the Human, and it is the only thing that builds the Kin-dom. It moves us from performing for people to being with people. It transforms us from monument-builders into companions, from spectacle-makers into servants, from those who capture glory into those who reflect it. Remember this simple mantra: listen, learn, love. As we internalize this rhythm, let it guide our actions and interactions, shaping us into true reflections of God's glory.

This describes the nature of authentic community: not a place where all answers are provided, but a space where the right questions are asked. It is not a sanctuary of performance, but one of presence.

So, where is the glory of God? It's not found in booths on a hill. It's not captured in monuments or managed through projects. It's found in the face of the neighbor we choose to love. It's revealed in the act of solidarity with the suffering. It's present in the work of justice for the oppressed and liberation for the prisoner.

The call to us today is clear: Leave the mountain. Stop trying to capture the light and start reflecting it. Stop building monuments to the holy and start embodying holiness in the mess of the world.

Go into the world not as experts on God, but as listeners. Meet people exactly where they are, in their mess, their hunger, and their hope. Sit with them. Walk with them. Listen to their stories. And in doing so, discover that God is already there.

We don't bring God down to the valley. We discover that God has already descended, that the glory of the Transfiguration has already taken flesh, that the light of the mountaintop is already shining in the face of the poor, the prisoner, the stranger, and the suffering.

God is waiting for us to stop talking, stop building, stop performing long enough to listen, and to see the face of Christ in the least of these. The sound of glory is not found in the thunder on the mountain. It's found in the cry of the hungry child. The whisper of the prisoner. The lament of the oppressed. And the voice of God saying, over and over: Listen to him. And listen to them. For that is where the Kin-dom is being built. Amen.