

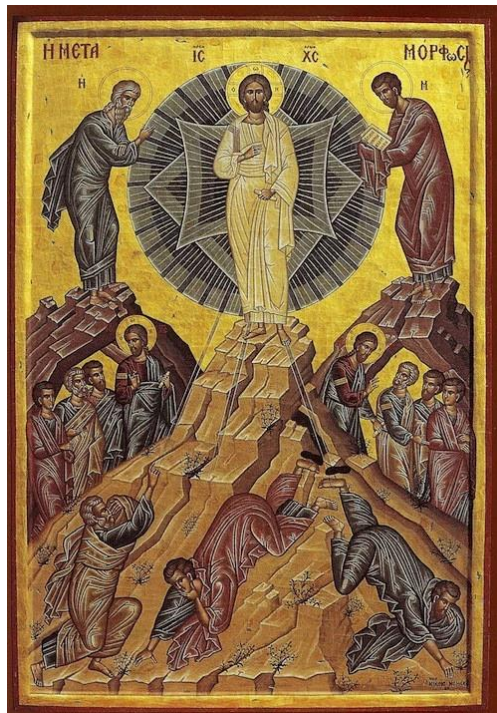


# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, FEBRUARY 23, 2020  
EXODUS 24:12-18; PSALM 99; 2 PETER 1:16-21; MATTHEW 17:1-9

## EVERY COMMON BUSH AFIRE WITH GOD



In 1857 Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote *Aurora Leigh*, an epic poem tapping a feminine wisdom to synthesize an understanding of the world as being wholly

spiritual and natural, at the same time, and beautifully provocative to those who are willing to open themselves to that reality.

The most famous lines from the poem may be familiar. She wrote:

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware...<sup>i</sup>*

The reference, of course, is to the account from Exodus, when Moses turns aside from his daily chores tending sheep, and climbs a nearby mountain to see this burning bush and engage God's presence. He is converted in the experience, and this marks the beginning of his ministry.

The account we here this morning from Exodus is in the middle of his ministry, years later, having led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, into the wilderness, and again ascends the mountain to engage God, whose glory is like a devouring fire, and yet does not devour Moses. But Moses is changed, transfigured, by the glory such that his face shines a dazzling white when he descends once more. So brilliant is his face, that the people ask him to cover it with a veil so they can look on him.

Moses leads the people through the desert for forty years—the biblical way of saying a long time, long enough for the generation to turn over, that is, a lifetime—but he ends his ministry short of the promised land, dying on

a hillside in Moab, looking across the river valley to the promised land, but not crossing over into it.

The echoes of this saga strike our ears as we listen to the gospel this morning. The pattern is picked up—Jesus' ministry begins at his baptism, with the clouds opening and a voice from heaven blessing him. The dove serves as symbol declaring that the earth is God's dwelling place.

And marking the middle of his worldly ministry, Jesus ascends a mountain and is transfigured, dazzling white robes with clouds wafting past. He has witnesses—Peter, James and John—but tells them to keep the report veiled until the divine plan is fulfilled.

And Jesus descends the mountain, and turns his face toward Jerusalem, where he will die an ignoble death at the hands of men who “daub their faces unaware” of their actions.

We hear this story on the final Sunday before Lent, our forty-day trek in the wilderness—forty days being the holy interval marking the fullness of time the length of time required to live fully into the experience.

But today we are invited to engage transfiguring experiences, presumably priming us for the journey, helping us make sense of what lies ahead, helping us make sense of the profoundly beautiful ways that

the world is wholly natural and spiritual, at the same time.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God...*

We all know the joy and transformative power of “mountaintop experiences” when the air thins and the heavens open to reveal beauty that takes our breath away. Endorphins surge in our veins, and stimulate our hearts and brains with the moving sense of the holy, and a lightness of being emanates the message to others that we have been to the mountaintop and our “eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

But then we must descend, not knowing what the world may hold for us. Except we need not think we go alone.

In icons featuring the Transfiguration of Christ, one of which I've included in the manuscript in the narthex and will have on the website tomorrow, the icon centers on the person of Christ radiating glory, with Moses and Elijah on either side of him, representing the Law and the Prophets, which are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. The three disciples are beneath Christ, having fallen to the ground in fear and worship, shoes off.

But in traditional icons of the Transfiguration two more scenes are included, conveying two other important temporal elements of the experience. To the

far left, Jesus is leading the three disciples up the mountain, and to the far right, they are descending, only the disciples go ahead of Jesus.

The implication is clear: having experienced the transfiguring moment, when the portals open wide between heaven and earth, and the glory of God effuses the scene and our gaze of it, we are changed, for a purpose—to descend the mountain, and present Christ's mercy and peace and love to a world in desperate need of such palliative care.

And the second implication, as Christ descends with us, is that we need not think the transfiguring presence of God can only occur on mountaintops.

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries,  
And daub their natural faces unaware...*

Seeing the glory of God in your midst will not inoculate you from the vagaries of life lived in the valley, but it may just help you see the world differently, recognizing it as a radiant setting for holy possibilities in which you are the bearer of God's glory and good news, sharing the sublime word that God is present with us, speaking words to all as beloved.

So look for the burning bushes this week, take off your shoes, let your face light up with a

transfiguring beauty that declares to all that God is good and merciful and steadfastly in love with you and all in this wonderful world.

**Exodus 24:12-18** [*The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.*]

**Matthew 17:1-9** [*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 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!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”]*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.bartleby.com/236/86.html>



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!