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St. Thomas Episcopal Church
2.14.21 Last Sunday of Epiphany
2 Kings 2:1-12; 2 Cor. 4:3-6; Mk
9:2-9

THE FUTURE TO COME

Where are we headed? What is our future? Where are we going? What has God called us to be and become? These are the questions that the disciples Peter, James, and John were likely asking themselves as they climbed the high mountain with Jesus. The success of any climbing expedition depends on the integrity and skill of the leader, the clarity of the vision and mission, the trust and faithfulness of the followers.

The disciple Peter knew this when he answered Jesus' penetrating question that precedes the beginning of their journey up Transfiguration Mountain. Remember the question? Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, true to his personality, a likely 8 on the enneagram, is the only one bold enough to venture an answer, "You are the Christ, the Messiah." But all hell breaks loose after Jesus defines both the mission and the cost of following him, "I must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders, die and after three days rise again."

Remember what happened next? Peter couldn't accept this vision of Jesus future—in fact he rebuked Jesus for talking about it in the way he did. He could not accept this vision of his future should he remain Jesus' disciple. Looking at Peter eye-to-eye, Jesus simply replied, "Get behind me Satan!" Jesus' response was harsh but isn't there something demonic when any person attempts to deny or prevent oneself or others from receiving the divinely blessed future that God desires for all to receive?

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Peter could have walked away that very moment, but he doesn't—he follows Jesus up the mountain where God gave birth to futures beyond Peter's wildest imaginings. But even after summiting with Jesus and James and John, the struggle continued. Eventually, however, the vision of his future with Christ became so compelling that Peter would eventually lay his life down for this vision, this impossible dream, and the hope for a shinningly new and transcendent life. Peter found it hard to keep the faith and so do we.

How many of you are having trouble imagining a future in light of what we have all endured this past year. Many of us are just living day-to-day trying to complete the often-overwhelming tasks of trying to stay safe and sane, navigating the Alice and Wonderland experience of qualifying for a vaccine, holding onto our jobs, or trying to like our jobs that have changed so significantly, parenting children wrestling with online instruction, nurturing friendships, and marriages that we may not have energy to take good care of. When we are able to pause and catch our breath long enough, we are at risk of imagining a life and a future that is dark and full of losses and can-no-longer-dos, grief for a life that we are beginning to realize will not likely come back in the form we once knew it.

Healthy thinking about our future is clearly at risk and is in short supply. And apparently there may be an evolutionary reason for it. Recent brain research has revealed that the further we try to imagine ourselves in the future the more our brains stop activating, making it more difficult to brainstorm about a brighter future. It appears that we are wired, especially when stressed, to focus on putting out the fires of the present moment. This wiring is hard to overcome—we can't easily do that without intentionally cultivating the practice of courage and

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plugging ourselves into God through meditation and other disciplines. This is what Lent is all about! In other words, we all need spiritual intervention!

By the way, Jesus clearly needed it as well in order for him to claim and live into his future. You will notice Jesus frequently prayed and stepped away from his frustrations and distractions. An interesting detail in the story of the Transfiguration is that it took six full days after Peter attempted to derail Jesus' mission before Jesus felt centered enough to lead Peter, James, and John up the mountain. We must never forget Jesus was fully human.

All this is to say, that the story of the transfiguration of Christ couldn't be more relevant and important to us as we attempt to imagine and dream of what might come next for ourselves, our families, our job, and our church as we begin to think of a time, hopefully in the nearer future, when we can begin to open things back up slowly and be reunited eventually. We need to trust that God is preparing us and that he will intervene and guide us.

When Jesus led Peter, James, and John up the high mountain he gave them an amazing gift that they likely didn't fully appreciate until much later when their dreams and their expectations were crushed as Jesus hung on the cross. On that mystical mountain, Jesus changed his appearance in an unmistakable and gloriously transcendent way not only to reveal his divine nature but so his disciples, and that includes us as well, could find the courage to look into the future when the present seemed so uncertain, troubling, even disturbing.

In that dazzlingly and brilliantly illuminated face Jesus' disciples were given a foretaste of what they would see after Jesus arose from the

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dead and ascended to heaven—the grey, lifeless face of their teacher at his death and all the broken dreams it represented would eventually become full of new life and it would eventually shine brighter than any ray of sun. And eventually, the disciples, too, would be radiant with this divine glory. By revealing his divine nature, Jesus gave his disciples the gift of hope and the reassurance that they would be part of a future --- not just any future but a glorious one--that would transcend the present suffering and be part of a kingdom of love that has no end.

In time his disciples would learn, just as we have, that we will be transformed if we are brave enough to enter into the cloud of unknowing with Christ, we stand in the nearer presence of a God who saves, heals, and will give us a new life worth living. If this sounds like a foreign language to you, it is! This is not the language our culture normally speaks. We are taught that it is all up to us to figure things out on our own and without God.

If you are listening this morning wondering if God is real or if feel you have no real future. You are welcome here. You might be surprised. We are a community that desires to understand your pain and has likely experienced the hopelessness you may be feeling. Please tell us who you are, and we will walk with you up whatever mountain you may find yourself on.

Today and every day we, though the eyes of faith, are given the opportunity to meet a terrifyingly beautiful and loving God who wants to know each and every one of us intimately and will go to great lengths to help us become more, not less, of who we were created by God to become as individuals and as community of faith. If we come into the presence of the living God, we will be changed and potentially everything and everyone we touch.

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In a major survey done by a non-profit group in Palo Alto, California called the *Institute for the Future* the results revealed that we human beings have more difficulty imagining the future as we age. Apparently, we lose gray matter and connectivity in the regions of our brain associated with picturing the future. Very surprisingly having children or grandchildren did not increase the frequency of thinking about the future. Only one thing did: a brush with mortality, a near-death experience, or a traumatic event. So, the time may be right—a God breaking into our world moment-- for us to imagine a new future, even a glorious one created in the image of God. As followers of Jesus, we have been given the gift of being able to see change as positive and even necessary and to receive the glorious possibility and dream of being transformed.

As we prepare to begin the season of Lent, where ashes remind us of our mortality, I invite you to keep climbing whatever mountain you may be on, knowing that Jesus will meet you there and will wrap you in his glorious presence and love and offer you a promising future with us, your St. Thomas family, and friends. Together, we need not fear the future that is to come. Amen.