The Rev. James Richardson  
Last Epiphany-Transfiguration Sunday  
Feb. 23, 2020

Many years ago, on a sunny August day, Canon David Link, our music director, and I set forth to climb Mount Hoffman, an 11,000-foot peak in Yosemite National Park.

I have threatened David for many years with telling this story, and today is the day.

Now, as peaks go, Mt. Hoffman is certainly not the highest in Yosemite, but it has the advantage being in the exact geographic center of Yosemite, with spectacular views into every corner of the park.

Mt. Hoffman does not require technical climbing gear, but it has its own special challenges, so we gave ourselves three days to climb it.

And, mind you, David is a highly skilled and experienced mountaineer who takes no unnecessary chances. I’m also experienced in the mountains so I figured we knew what we were doing.

One of the challenges of climbing Mt. Hoffman is finding the trail to the top. The higher you go, the less obvious the route up.

And that is another way of telling you that we got lost.

Oh, we got to the top of a mountain just fine. The view was spectacular.

But when we looked at our topographic map, we realized that whatever we climbed wasn’t Mount Hoffman.

We were on top of another peak, gazing across at Mt. Hoffman.

We somehow zigged when we should have zagged, and we ended up on a different peak.

I mention all this because I am in full sympathy with the disciples and their confusion in the gospel story this morning.

They climb a mountain in the fog, and everything is disorienting.

Then they see Jesus dazzling white surrounded by Moses and Elijah.

To say the least, their vision on the mountaintop is very unsettling.

The disciples must have wondered if they should have zigged when they zagged.

So Peter blurts out the first thing that comes to mind:

“Hey, I know – let’s make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

For those who might be unsure what these dwellings are: they are “tabernacles” – or tents – that devout Jews erect once a year for the Festival of Tabernacles.
When Peter sees the shimmering vision of Jesus, he goes to the only reference point on the topographic map he knows: the familiar categories of his religion.

Peter is trying to make sense of incomprehensible with the only language he has. He and the others are having a mystical vision, or what mystics call a “numinous experience.”

But Peter’s experience is bigger than can be contained by the symbols and language of any human religion. His experience is beyond explanation. Sometimes the categories and symbols of religion don’t work well.

So rather than try to explain that which cannot be explained, I want to come at this from another direction, from another peak: The mountaintop of Easter.

A little background helps:

This story appears in all four gospels and is called the “Transfiguration of Jesus” because Jesus is “transfigured,” or changed, into this dazzling apparition.

But it is equally true that the disciples are transfigured. This vision on the mountaintop changes Peter and the others forever.

This story is the hinge point in the Gospel of Matthew. It is placed exactly halfway through the gospel, and for a reason.

We have marched uphill through the Gospel of Matthew to get to the mountaintop of the Transfiguration, and we are now going to march downhill to Jerusalem and the Cross.

This story also comes on this particular Sunday every year for a reason.

We hear this as we prepare to descend into the valley of Lent.

But before we go into this deep valley of the soul, we get a glimpse of another peak in the distance – the dazzling peak of Easter.

Jesus is telling his disciples – and us – don’t despair, you will get to the mountaintop of Easter and new life.

Yes, you will walk through the low valleys in life, but you will reach healing and new life however long it takes.

I think all of us need to hear this especially today. Our congregation is going through a lot right now.

Candidly, we’ve experienced a wave of serious illnesses and deaths. We have six funerals in the next few weeks. Using a phrase from Canon Lynell, this is a very tender time in our life together – a tender time.

It is a time for tears and a time for holding each other up. It’s a time to be gentle and a time to share memories.
But this is also a time to remind ourselves that we don’t have to walk into the valleys alone. This means to be a in faith community walking together. This is why we are here.

Lent is a time, I believe, that is a gift to us. Lent is a time when we can be especially aware of the gifts God gives us that we share together — and this is what makes Lent a gift to us in this tender time.

Lent is a time to be more introspective, and more aware of the Holy within ourselves, and in those who are in the valleys with us.

I am convinced that all of us encounter these moments of the holy, but we sometimes don’t notice.

It is why Lent is a time of slowing down, being more aware of the holy in the unexpected moment.

But to be open to these moments sometimes requires asking hard questions about ourselves: What we have done and left undone, how we treat others — and how we treat ourselves.

Sometimes all it takes to see God is to look for the smile of a stranger, or sharing kind words with someone close to us.

And when we fall short, as all of us do, we can pick ourselves up and try again. Sometimes we end up on the wrong mountain, but we can try again. That is the meaning of repentance.

By the way, for the record, Canon Link went back up Mt. Hoffman a year later and found the right trail. But even on the wrong peaks, we can glimpse new life and the wonder of salvation.

So today let’s linger awhile on the dazzling mountaintop and watch for Easter beyond, and may each of us be transfigured together. AMEN