In Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Mountain Top speech” the day before he was shot, he said: “Well, I don't know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Let’s talk about mountaintop experiences. The most significant events in the Bible occur on mountains, some are famous mountains, others are unnamed, as in today’s Gospel. The characters in the Bible look up to the mountain, they go to the mountain, they encounter God on the mountain: Mt. Moriah, Mt. Horeb, which is the same as Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion, Mt. Nebo, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Gilboa, the Mount of Olives, the sermon on the mount, and a hill called Golgotha.

Moses was physically transformed by his repeated trips to the summit of Mt. Sinai. He met God on the mountain, and he was changed forever. Early Christians read this passage from Exodus within the context of Jesus’s Transfiguration. But Paul interpreted the event to authenticate his own ministry with the Church at Corinth. And in Luke Jesus takes Peter and John and James to the mountain, that unnamed mountain. Jesus has revealed his identity to them. When asked “Who do the crowds say that I am?” Some thought Jesus was John the Baptist or Elijah. And while Peter had declared that he was “the Messiah of God” (Luke 9:18-20), his followers do not understand fully what they have heard or what they themselves have confessed. Through prayer they were prepared for an amazing
moment. There on the mountain Jesus’s countenance changed, and he was dressed in Mosaic clothing. He appears like a prophet like Moses. And his words are to be heeded like Moses’s words: “Listen to him” God says. Luke even has Jesus speak of his own Exodus, another “flash forward” of his death and resurrection and ascension. They see a vision of the consummation of the Kingdom of God, with Jesus as God’s Son, the Chosen One, in his glory.

Barbara Brown Taylor, renown teacher and preacher, gives us an interesting picture of the Transfiguration. Imagine what seeing Jesus standing there with Moses and Elijah must have been like seeing the Mount Rushmore of heaven: the Lawgiver, the Prophet, and the Messiah, wrapped in such glory. It is a wonder that the other three – Peter, James and John, could see them all.

The story of the Transfiguration is the culmination of the Epiphany Season when Jesus is revealed to us as being one with God. I believe that we read today’s lessons about shining moments on the mountain top to lead us to the cross. We know historically that the festival of the Transfiguration was instituted in 1457 to be August 6th (to commemorate the defeat of the Turks on that date the previous year). The church moved these readings to the Sunday before Ash Wednesday because Jesus will come down from the mountain to begin the journey to Jerusalem. Jesus will begin his journey to Golgatha. But before the agony of his passion, we have this beautiful image to hold on to.

We are just a few days before Lent begins and we have God’s light to carry within us, to sustain us. During Lent we will experience difficult days as we relive Jesus’s final days among us – as one of us. Let us hold onto the light of the transfiguration. In that shining moment on the mountain God claimed Jesus as his son. And God claimed us, his human children in that shining mountain top experience. And then he sent Jesus and us (Jesus’s human brothers and sisters) back down the mountain.

Moses face was transfigured when he spoke with God. His face was shining. When Moses came down from Mt. Sinai he put a veil on his face. Paul would have the
Corinthians (and us) – having been transformed – live with boldness and allow God’s glory to show, to shine. After praying on the mountain Peter, James, and John saw the change in Jesus, they saw his face glowing, they saw his dazzling white clothes, they saw Jesus in his glory with Moses and Elijah, and they wanted the shining moment to never end. They wanted to stay on the mountaintop. They didn’t want their mountaintop experience to end. But come down they must. They came down from the mountain to a crowd, to the hurting world Jesus had come to heal. He would continue to heal even when faced with of the unbelief of his contemporaries. Through his transfiguration and his healing acts Jesus and God were made more fully present to the disciples, to all humankind – to us.

There is a fresco on the wall of my home church in New Orleans with Jesus in a cloud on the mountaintop. His hands are in the “touchdown” position. Six months before Katrina I was talking with the bishop after service, and he pointed up to the wall and said that Jesus was saying “What’s next?” What’s next? It was a prophesy of sorts, for little did we know what was next for the city of New Orleans. What’s next? In Dr. King’s prophetic mountain top speech the day before he was shot, he spoke as if he might not get to the promised land, just as Moses never got to the promised land. Jesus foretold his death just before and just after today’s Gospel story. And, reading ahead, we know that Jesus’s acts of mercy would continue to be greeted with disbelief and that this would lead to the cross. But then all of Jesus’s work is seen through the vantage point of the cross, is it not? What’s next? As we enter into Lent, we will come down from the mountain to carry the light of Christ’s glory as we travel with him on the road to the cross and on to the top of the mount of the skull – Golgatha. Only after Jesus’s resurrection is revealed to the women outside the empty tomb and on the road to Emmaus do his followers understand Jesus’s prophecies. What’s next? Early in Lent we will have an instructed Eucharist based on the Emmaus story. The service will be as always, but there will be interpretive explanations of what’s next and why we do what we do.