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## Sit or Follow?

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### A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh

I do not know about you, but I found the opening lines of today's gospel a little confusing. "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain." The gospel writer wants us to know (actually the first thing he wants us to know) is that something important happened six days earlier.

If we were reading Mark by chapter and verse we would know what happens, but reading the gospel passage as it is presented this morning leaves us with no idea about what occurred six days earlier. So, what happened?

If we back up a few verses (starting at Mark 8:31) here is what we find. "Jesus was teaching his disciples *"that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he said this plainly. And Peter took Jesus, and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter, and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men."* Jesus goes on to say, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8: 34).

This is an important part of today's reading because we see that six days earlier there was a fundamental disagreement (with some harsh words exchanged) about Jesus' life and what it means to be a disciple. It seems a little ironic that six days later (in today's reading), Peter gets exactly what he wants. Jesus invites Peter, James and John to go with him to the mountain, where Jesus transfigures before them, with his garments becoming glistening white. If that is not enough, the theatricality gets turned up a notch as Moses (bearer of the law) and Elijah (the great prophet), surround Jesus on either side.

Peter is overcome with joy and says "master it is well that we are here." You can almost see it in his face. Jesus, this is what I was talking about six days ago. Now you are acting like the Son of Man. You are transfiguring in glory surrounded by Moses and Elijah. This is what it means to be God, it does not include any of that suffering and dying we argued about six days ago!

Peter's understanding of God is confirmed, and he is so excited to be a disciple that he volunteers to chair the capital campaign and build three booths for worship. "One for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. At the moment Peter seems to have it all figured out a voice comes from above, "This is my son, listen to him." Listen to Him. Peter, listen to what Jesus said six days ago, "The Son of Man must undergo suffering and death."

This transfiguration is a holy event for Peter, James and John, but the next transfiguration, the one on the cross, will transfigure humankind. Peter will never understand this, unless he leaves the mountain, follows Jesus and walks the way of the cross.

Every time I read today's gospel reading I am taken back to my early twenties, when I was working as Lay Chaplain at Sewanee and discerning a call to the priesthood. During those years I would come to the big city of Atlanta to see the Braves with my good friend, Austin. During one of those Braves games we were talking about how we wanted to go out

West and hike some of our National Parks.

We were just out of college, gainfully employed, and in decent physical shape. We also knew enough about romance to know if one of us got married that hiking 20 miles a day, sleeping in a tent and eating 10 days of Ramen Noodles and Quaker Oatmeal were going to be a difficult sell to most women. If we were going to hike, now was the time. So that summer we boarded a plane and headed out to Zion, Bryce and the Grand Canyon.

I will always remember our first hike, it was in Zion National Park and we set out to climb Angel's Landing. About two miles into the hike we emerged from a series of switchbacks and came to a flat area with panoramic views and a clear view of the last half-mile. The final section of the trail has no margin of error, as there are chains for hikers to hold onto as they ascend Angels Landing.

I made it fifty feet down the trail before sat down and assumed what Austin called the 5 point stance (rear end firmly planted on the mountain, with my heels and hands holding on for life). I wasn't going anywhere and tried to encourage Austin to hike on without me. He was not going to hike alone. After about an hour of sitting on the open face of a mountain in the middle of the desert heat, my hiking buddy began to get frustrated (imagine that). Austin said, "Wallace we didn't drop money on plane ticket and rental car to come sit on the mountain." He said, "The trail ahead of us will not be easy, but if you have a little faith and follow me, it might be the most amazing hike of our lives." He was right about the hike and about so much more.

I have always found it a little ironic that event happened in a National Park named Zion (another word for Jerusalem and Hebrew for Dwelling Place), while hiking Angel's Landing, with words spoken from a friend who wasn't transfiguring, but did have quite the sunburn!

When I got down from that mountain my relationship with God had changed.

1. I was thankful to be alive.
2. I decided to enter the discernment process for the priesthood.

My friend had spoken some powerful words that went to the heart""As a Christian, I was not called to sit on the mountain / in the pew; I was called to follow Christ.

There is (and has always been) a large picture of Angels Landing is in my office. It is as a constant reminder of today's gospel""Following Jesus is not about sitting on the mountain, it is about walking the way of the cross!

At the Dean's Bible Study retreat this weekend, we talked about the stages of life. Almost everyone agreed that one of the Transfiguring moments of life was the arrival of a child. You parents know exactly what I am talking about, and you parents on the front rows (here for baptism) are living it right now!

One of the men said the blessing of a child was a life-changing event, but what was transfiguring for him (what brought him back to church) was the realization that God loved him in the same way he loved his child , he had heard it before, but it was the first time he came to understand it.

As we baptize these children into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and make the sign of the cross on their foreheads, we are reminded about God's unconditional love for us. It is a love that transforms us, a love that changes us, and a love that calls us to leave the mountain and boldly journey into the mystery of the cross! AMEN.