

Do you remember right before Christmas when the Atlanta airport got shut down? Well that happened right when I first sat down with JR to write this sermon. I remember because I got a text message from my husband: he was stuck in the airport in Atlanta. He had been in Wisconsin for a business trip and was flying home. I picked up the phone and called him to get more details; we had plans that evening and wanted to know if I needed to cancel. He said as he stepped off the airplane the power went out in the airport, came back on and then was off again. They had been sitting for a few hours in the dark waiting and his phone was dying so he couldn't talk long.

Casey said the longer he sat there with his employee, he looked around at the hundreds and then thousands of people that were stacking up and wondering how and when they were all going to get out of the airport. The tarmac started to pile up with airplanes, security started pushing all of the passengers to gates 1-12 leaving the others open. (fact about how big Atlanta airport is). They were just pushed farther and farther back and piled up and piled up in the dark with fire alarms and sirens going off.

Casey then started surveying the situation and the area and thought, "I'm not going to be stuck here at the back behind thousands of people. Once they release us we are all going to be going in one direction and this is going to become even more chaotic. He told his employee we are getting to the front of this crowd so we can get out of here as soon as we are able to. They both pushed and worked their way to the front, snuck through the barrier that had been created to keep everyone in just twelve of the \_\_\_\_\_ terminals and hide behind a pillar and trash can. Casey told his employee when they tell us we can go we are going!! Get ready!! Soon, all of the passengers were released to leave to find a rental car, book a hotel or find a place to stay because no more flights were going out for the day or night. Casey looked at his employee and said, "Ready? Here we go. We are getting out of here and to daylight as fast as we can. Keep up and let's get moving!"

Whether you're a Type A commander like my husband or whether you're the type to sit back and wait for the crowds to disperse, we've all been in those stressful situations. And how often do we think, right in the midst of those stresses, "What would Jesus do?" Not often, if we're being honest. It's easy to think about Jesus here in Church - this is where Jesus belongs. But what could Jesus possibly have to do with the chaos of the Atlanta airport? Or any of the places in our everyday world where we don't think Jesus belongs our....workplace, school, neighborhoods, the park, highway 75, restaurants. The last thing my husband was thinking while he was in the Atlanta airport was his WWJD bracelet. He was wanting to get himself and his employee to safety and along the way helped a man that needed helping.

2. Where does Jesus fit in our everyday lives? While most of us have a sense that God probably cares about the world outside our Sunday mornings, we struggle to see what practical difference God makes in the busyness of our week.

Which means today is going to be fun. Because it's Transfiguration Sunday - a special day in the life of the Church when we celebrate that God is not only the God of special places and special people. Today

is a celebration of the God who cares about Sunday mornings and churches *and* the Atlanta airport and folks fighting traffic on 75 and kids and parents and teachers and mechanics and fast food workers and stay at home parents and people who don't have a job right and the old and the young and the insiders and the outsiders and...

You get the idea, right? Today is about the God who leaves Heaven to live on the ground with us - the God who brings us freedom. The question we'll ask today is: Are we brave enough to live in God's freedom?

Let's stand and sing together about this God who is with us everywhere and always!

### 3. Message

Today is the final Sunday of Epiphany, the season in the Church year that follows Christmas. If Christmas is the celebration that God is with us, Epiphany is the season that asks, "So what?" What does it mean that God is with us? How does the reality of God with us shape our daily lives?

That's an especially important question today. The final Sunday of Epiphany is Transfiguration Sunday, a day that celebrates the God who comes down off the Mountain.

I know... what?

We don't think about God on the top of a mountain today, but in the ancient world, everyone thought gods lived on top of mountains (like the Greeks with Mt. Olympus). It makes sense - if Heaven is up, mountains are the closest you can get to the gods. If a human wanted to be super-spiritual, they had to climb a mountain.

But in the Transfiguration, we celebrate not only that Jesus is God, but that he came down the mountain. God lives on the ground with us. There's no such thing as super-spiritual people on pedestals (or mountain tops!). People who are higher, who have better access to God. God came down to all of us.

And that makes a big difference for those of us who have answered the call to join God's mission in the world.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to 2 Corinthians. Our Epiphany series has been called "Ask Better Questions. We've been mainly in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, watching as he's reframed questions they asked him to get at the question *behind* the questions, to get at what they were *really* asking (or in some cases, what they should've been asking).

2 Corinthians is another letter Paul wrote, and things haven't gotten better at Corinth. Quite the opposite, in fact. A group of Christians has apparently been following Paul all over the Mediterranean, going to the churches he's planted and "correcting" his teaching. 2 Corinthians is the letter Paul wrote to

the Corinthians after he heard his opponents had come to Corinth. The big question Paul's addressing here is, "Do Gentiles have to keep Moses' Law to follow Jesus?"

Paul says, No. But what's interesting for us is *why* he says No. According to Paul, insisting non-Jews have to follow the Law is based in Fear. Fear of God's true power.

There's a story about a veil you need to know for Paul's words to make sense: When Israel was wandering in the wilderness, God lived with them in a tent they called the Tabernacle - it was a portable temple. And Moses, their leader, would go into the Tabernacle to speak with God. The Tabernacle was classic mountain-top faith. Because only a very few special people (Moses and the priests) could go talk to God in the Tabernacle. That sounds like many of our churches today. God is in church, on Sundays, and only our pastors really talk to him.

When Moses talked to God, his face would glow for a couple of days - it was like he had soaked up extra holiness. That glowing face reminded the people of God's glory. They were scared of Moses - of what Moses represented (that God wanted to be with them). So they begged Moses to wear a veil - something to separate them from God's glory again.

That mountain-top religion, where people are separated from God? It wasn't God's idea. It was *our* idea. It's not that God didn't want to come off the mountain, it was that *we were afraid for God to leave the mountain and live with us*.

Over and over in Israel's history, God called them to a close, deep, personal faith. And over and over the people shrank back afraid. Afraid of God's power, afraid of God's glory. Afraid of what it might mean for *them* if they really had to be loved by this God. So they insisted on intermediaries. Veils. Go-betweens to separate them from God. As far as Paul is concerned, Moses' veil and mountains are the same thing: something to keep God at arm's length.

Paul is about to say that his opponents in Corinth are afraid of the same thing. They want God trapped safely behind the Law. Separated from the Gentiles by blood-relation. They don't want a God who comes down off the mountain to live with us. They don't want a God who tears off the veil to be with us. They want God at a distance. Let's listen to what Paul says:

If the Good News we preach is hidden behind a veil, it is hidden only from people who are perishing. Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.

You see, we don't go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining

in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. -- 2 Corinthians 4:3-7

4. There is a reason why Paul wrote this letter. Paul is answering the question, “Do Gentiles have to follow the Law?” His answer is a resounding No! He says that thinking that the Law still stands between us and God is a satanic blindness.

The mountain-top religion of Law is *safer*. It’s safer if God stays distant on a mountain. Then we can only talk to God when we go to the mountain (or church on Sunday). We don’t have to be real with God because only pastors and religious figures can talk to God - we get to outsource our faith. Paul says, my critics are the kinds of people who have *always* been afraid of God leaving the mountain.

And you didn’t used to be afraid so *don’t let them make you afraid!*

5. Why would anyone be afraid of God leaving the mountain?

The Corinthians have begun to believe they’re not good enough for God. That the only ones worthy enough to go to the top of the mountain and speak to God were the pastors and religious leaders; the ones in power. That until they start keeping all the rules and laws, God will not welcome them.

The Super Apostles wanted them to always feel this way. If everyone was dependent on them to be the straight line to God then they would always be in power have the prestige they wanted. Like parents that never want their children to leave because they have power over them. It felt good for others to depend on them to talk to God. If I teach them to fish they will not need to come to me for what they are needing.

Paul didn’t see it this way. He would go into a church, teach them, then teach them how to use what he had taught them and leave. They would then write him letters to get help, assistance and answer any questions they might have, but by and large, they were on their own. They just had each other - and God. The God who had left the mountain. The God who lived inside them and among them. Paul had this crazy idea that *God was all they needed*. In other words, Paul worked hard to make sure the Corinthians weren’t dependent on him or any other outside leaders. Isn’t it better to teach them to fish then just give them the fish?

6. Today, are we the Corinthians who see that God is above us in the sky and the only one who has a hotline to him are pastors, ministers, religious leaders? Do we feel that we want it this way because we don’t want God in our everyday lives, in our messes, in our sin, in our everyday stuff? Do people today not want to face the reality that God is always with us? Why is intimacy with God scary today? Do we want to just pretend and portray the “perfect life” that we do on social media? Here’s the funny thing though, God knows what we are going to say before we say it!!

7. Easier for God to stay on the mountain

Should we just leave it to the professionals, the ones with the Biblical backgrounds and degrees? I can just come on Sunday and listen to my pastor that delivers a good message, take in the music, and then I unpack it, just leave it on my chair at church that way it is easier than what Paul is asking me to do. For all of us to do and don't worry about it Monday through Saturday until I come back again. It is easy that way. I have checked off my box, completed my religious to do list for the week and I am done!

8. In life easy is rarely the right thing or the good thing to do.

When God breaks out from the mountain and invades your everyday world, amazing things can happen. Even in the Atlanta airport. There was Casey, the general leading his troops into the 'Battle of Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport'. The officials opened the terminal and he led his team toward the car rentals. He looked back at his employee several times encouraging him to keep up! They then came to three escalators that of course were out of service! These escalators were not what you find at Firewheel Dillard's; they are three stories tall and of course not moving!!

Everyone is trying to get to the escalators as fast as they can, in the dark and get out of there. On one side able bodied people are walking up the escalator on the far left are people in wheelchairs or with walkers trying hard to get out and walk up the escalator and another escalator of others not able to go up the stairs. Casey sees a man that is close to his 90s that he knows will not make it up the three flights of stairs.

Casey had a choice to make here. He could keep going with his team - that's what most people were doing. It's not like the lines were going to get any shorter. But Casey saw someone vulnerable and in need of help. So he went to the woman with the old man and says, "I can take him up the escalator, but he has to be willing to go. Is he willing to go?" The woman whispers to the man and he says, yes he is willing and wanting to go up.

Casey gets the man on his back and starts walking up these flights of stairs. He is huffing and puffing. What Casey couldn't see from the man sitting is he was tall, taller than my husband who is 6'3. He gets half way up and the sweat is dripping off of him, his legs are burning. He gets to about twenty steps from the top and his legs are burning so bad he doesn't think he can make it. He takes one last big breath and charges his way through!! He gets to the top and yells for others to get a chair. A few other people bring over a bench to Casey and the man. Casey shakes his hand, tells him Merry Christmas, the man says thank you, you are a fine man. Casey leaves the man with his traveling companion and turns back to getting his team out of the airport.

Was Jesus in the Atlanta airport that day? I guarantee you that, for one 90-year-old man, Jesus looked a lot like my husband that day, interrupting his plans, putting the man on his back and climbing a three-story escalator.

Friends, when God comes down from the mountain and invades our everyday lives, we become the image of Jesus even in midst of chaos. You don't have to be a pastor or a super-evangelist or a religious leader to be Jesus in your world. Because God has come down off the mountain.

You don't have to wait for Sunday to encounter the life-changing power of God. It can happen any day. Because God has come down off the mountain.

You don't have to come to this building to encounter the transforming power of God. You can be anywhere, even in the airport. Because God has come down off the mountain.

God has left the mountain and now we're all Moses, our faces shining with the glory of God in our homes, at work, among our friends and family.

Whether it's in your daily routine or in a stressful, chaotic situation, you can be like Jesus. You can shine the light of God into the world. What is your next right step? God wants you to be a part of all of this, He is calling you to work with Him and to share His good news. What are you afraid of where God is calling you? Where do I feel insecure, inept, not able to accomplish? Because Paul is going to say GOOD!! This is where you shine the brightest. Paul wasn't the best speaker. He struggled speaking to groups and he was not memorizing by his voice or how he preformed. He really was not impressive and he was not good at what he did, but his heart is in it. He loved God. His desire to bring others to God was there. He said, The fact that I brought you to Christ through me shows that Christ is working!

11. It is easier for all of us to keep God on the mountain, to have others talk to him for us or to us about Him. But what is easy is seldom what is best. Paul is calling us to have God with us everyday in our everyday lives right down here on the ground from the mountain, in the valleys and in the straight streets to Jesus! In our jobs, our relationships, in our homes, in our families, in our grocery stores, in our minivan on the way to practice, at the lunch table with our colleagues, in those tough decisions we have to make financially, in making a career change, in your calling, in our community, in our world. We are to bring God's light to every place in our world.

## 12. Communion

[Communion Slide] We come to the communion table today at Jesus' invitation. Rather than staying distant in Heaven, Jesus comes to us as we are broken and hurting and invites us to join him, to allow him to carry us to the Cross and into his new life beyond. We sit at this table with his disciples the night before he was killed.

At this meal, he broke bread and gave it to us, saying, "This bread is my body, broken for you. Eat it all." Later in the meal, he passed a cup of wine, telling us, "This wine is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it all."

We approach Jesus' table today to meet the God who has left the mountain to live with us right where we are. We find this God in every meal, in every person we encounter in every place.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to receive communion today. If you're willing to respond to God, to do the next right thing right where you are, then you're welcome to come to the table.

Before we approach the table, I'm going to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I'll ask you four questions to give you space to reflect on what God is calling you to today. After we've worked through those questions, I'll pray for all of us, and then you're welcome to come forward as you're ready.

Here's the first question:

1. When in the last week have I sought God's presence?
2. When in the last week have I ignored God's presence?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to ignore God's presence?
4. How can I shine the light of God's presence in the week ahead of me?

### **Prayer**

God of Epiphany,

You have gathered us today to remember that, while we encounter you here in our gathering, you are not confined to this place. In coming to Earth, you've burst forth from the mountain top and filled every valley and space with your light and love.

We approach your table today at your invitation. As we come, remind us yet again that we go nowhere you have not already gone. We do nothing you have not already seen. And we encounter no one who is not your beloved child. As we receive these wafers and juice, make them to become a spiritual food for us. Give us the grace we need to be your people, to shine your light in every part of our lives.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

### **Closing**

A couple of quick things before you go:

First, thank you to you who support Catalyst through regular giving and serving. Thank you for enabling us to do what God is calling us to do right where we are.

Secondly, if you're a guest with us this morning, I want to say again how honored we are to have you with us. We hope you felt welcomed and encouraged and challenged with us this morning. We know how difficult it can be to connect with a new church, and we wanted to make it as easy as possible, so we created an experience called the Newcomers Lunch. We do it once a month. The next one is February 18. They're right after this, and they last about 45 minutes. We feed you, tell you who Catalyst is and what God is doing here, and we give you an easy next step to get connected.

If you'd like to sign up, check the top box on this Next Step card and drop it in the box by the door as you leave.

### **Assignment/Blessing**

Now, Catalyst, since Epiphany is when we ask about God's calling, we're giving you a question each week to spend the week meditating and praying on, discussing with your C-Groups. This week's question is the same question we began the season of Epiphany with. Our prayer is that you have a clearer, stronger sense of the next right step for you. So this week, prayerfully consider the question, **What is God calling me to do?**

Assignment - 2 Corinthians 4:7 What is God calling us to do? When are you faithful? When you follow God's call you shine! You reflect God's glory, that when they see God in you! Go shine like the sun to those in darkness!