**ASH WEDNESDAY, 3/2/22**

**SERMON ON MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21**

Sometimes we can all be looking at the same thing

and yet see something completely different.

A college Criminology professor was about to give the final exam to his students. Suddenly two men armed with handguns ran into the room.

They pulled one of the students out of his seat.

They roughed him up a bit, and then dragged him out of the room, saying:

“We told you what would happen if you didn't pay what you owed.”

After the class calmed down, the professor explained

that their final exam was to describe, in detail,

all they had just seen and heard.

Amazingly, no one got an A on the exam.

Everyone had seen the same thing,

but everyone saw it somewhat differently.

Some claimed there had been three, or even four, armed men.

Others said they took a girl from the room.

Almost no one remembered why they took the young man.

And not one of the students had noticed

the professor briefly held up a sign saying:

“This is just a simulation.”

Everyone had seen the same thing, but none of them saw everything that happened.

Peter, James, and John had a similar experience

when Jesus took the three of them up on the mountain to pray.

They didn't all see the same thing.

The three of them were very sleepy, but they had stayed awake,

so they wouldn't miss anything.

And yet they did not fully understand what was happening.

They saw Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus.

And they believed they ought to do something.

Peter wanted to build three dwellings for Moses and Elijah and Jesus.

But that wasn't what was important to Jesus.

He wanted His followers to understand who He was and why He was with them.

He wanted them to know what a difference it was going to make in their lives.

Yet we humans are often slow to understand.

Hearing God's voice in the cloud of darkness helped them

to recognize the importance of this event.

It took a lot of time, but His disciples finally understood and acted.

We are often as slow as the apostles, but gradually we begin to understand.

Then we can begin to do what God wishes us to do.

We begin to understand God's plan.

And it makes all the difference.

We begin to live differently, and to act differently to those around us.

We begin to share God's love with others.

The transfiguration shows us Jesus is so much more than simply a good person.

He is the Son of God.

And that makes all the difference in our lives.

The transfiguration transforms us to live God's way.

Gradually this event changed how the apostles lived, and what they did.

But it was a slow process.

We begin to see God's Son in all His Glory, His identity, His power.

During this mountain top event God showed the disciples, and all of us,

just who Jesus was.

God said: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him."

Yet understanding takes time.

Mountain top experiences are special.

They help us to understand the true nature of Jesus.

We are meant to be eye witnesses of His majesty.

We gain knowledge and understanding

to help us when we come down to the valleys.

We are not meant to remain on the mountain.

We are to share God's love in the dark valleys.

Early in his ministry Pastor Spencer Morgan Rice

was serving a small congregation in the Los Angeles area.

The sexton of the church took as much interest

in those who came to pray and meditate as he did the upkeep of the church.

One man in particular attracted his attention.

This man suddenly began to drop by the church briefly every day about 12:15.

He would walk down the center aisle, stand at the chancel steps,

and stare at the altar for a moment.

Then he would leave.

After a few days, the sexton began to worry.

The man was not well dressed.

He was not the cleanest.

He did not always walk steady.

The sexton mentioned his concern to Reverend Rice,

who suggested the sexton simply

ask the man if there was anything the church could do for him.

The next day when the man came into the church,

the sexton asked him if the church could help him in any way.

The man answered: "No, thank you.

I just come in every day and stand before the altar

and say, "Jesus, it's Jim."

It is not much of a prayer, I know.

But I think God knows what I mean."

Months slipped by.

And the man stopped coming to the church each day.

Then, one morning Pastor Rice received a phone call

from the Mother Superior of a home for older men

run by the Sisters of the Transfiguration.

The Mother Superior told Rice that Jim had been admitted.

Pastor Rice said he would be out to see him.

She met him at the door and told him, "Pastor Rice,

this man has been here for two months.

He went into the most cantankerous ward we have.

Every nun here has tried her best

to bring some sense of joy and peace to that ward.

We all failed.

But when Jim went into that ward, the place was transformed.

It is a new place.

I went to him two days ago and I asked:

Jim, how is it that you have been able to bring

such joy, and such a sense of peace, to these men?"

He answered, "Oh, Sister, it is because of my visitor."

The Mother Superior looked at Pastor Rice and said:

"I was surprised, because I know he didn't have any visitors.

That chair hadn't been occupied the 60 days he has been here."

So I asked him: "Jim, what visitors? I've never seen a visitor."

Jim answered: "Sister, every day at 12:00,

My visitor comes and stands at the foot of my bed and says:

“Jim, it's Jesus!”

“And that makes all the difference.”

Jim added: "He knows who I am.

He knows where I am.

And He is always with me.

Some of the other old men here have come to know Him.

They know He cares.

Encountering Jesus' love and presence, has made all the difference."

Having peace of mind is always knowing that Jesus is here.

Do you remember when the disciples were on a stormy lake at night?

In the distance they saw a figure approaching them on top of the water;

they thought it was a ghost.

But when Jesus got within hearing distance He said,

“Don't be afraid, it is I.”

We can be at peace because Jesus is with us.

And it makes all the difference.

AMEN