

MYSTERY ON A MOUNTAIN – JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION

An Ep4C February 3, 2008 update Sermon by Dan Stern Luke 9:28-36

Today already is the last Sunday of what is sometimes called on the Western Christian calendar The Season of Light, or of The Epiphany, which in the original Greek means 'to shine upon' or 'to give light to' the people. This year, the Epiphany season is rather short in duration, which is too bad, given that outside the church, we are still trudging through a rather cold, dark winter. But normally in worship, adequate time and thematic emphasis is given for us to bask in the warmth of the light a bit more, beginning back at the start of the year with that bright, shining star that led the Wise Men to the baby Jesus, and culminating with today's grand finale on a mountaintop, where Jesus is revealed to us in glory as being one with God.

And it's interesting that today – Transfiguration Sunday – this grand finale, this big shining moment, this ultimate Epiphany, comes right before the more somber season of Lent. This is a big change, a major transition in liturgical theme and tone, and it makes brilliant sense as a means of instruction for our lives. Transitions do have a way of taking place in our own lives, after all – both big and small ones – and transitions are both perilous and promising. When I go through my own life's rocky periods of transition, I sometimes sing to myself the John Prine song, that reminds me, "One minute you're up, the next, you're down, half an inch of water, and you think you're gonna' drown, but that's the way the world goes 'round." Ain't it the truth! Those spiritual forerunners who gave the church its liturgical seasons and colors and themes had, attached to their spiritual wisdom, a very pragmatic dimension. Paying attention to tonal and thematic transitions in our common worship life can help us deal with our own personal moods and life transitions. So do come back on Ash Wednesday and see how dramatically this sanctuary will have changed.

But today, it takes place...upon a mountain. Some of the most glorious moments in life seem to happen up on mountaintops, don't they? Sure seems that way to me.

Ever since I was a little boy, I've wanted to be on the tops of mountains. My father was the same way. He built our family home at the top of the hill, so we could see snowcapped Windy Peak and catch a glimpse of the North Cascades every day. I've always sought out the wide viewplaces, the broad vistas. The Psalmist of Psalm 121 says, 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help.' And throughout sacred scripture, Biblical characters do just that – they lift up their eyes, they turn their attention to Mt. Moriah, Mt. Horeb or Mt. Sinai, Mt. Zion, Mt. Nebo, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Gilboa, the Mt. of Olives, the sermon on the mount, and a hill called Golgotha.

Right before beginning his fatal journey to Jerusalem, to that hill called Golgotha, Jesus went up to another high place, and there, experienced a moment of profound spiritual transcendence. Everything else, including all he would soon have to physically endure, suddenly paled by comparison to that brilliant moment, that glorious epiphany.

The same thing happened to Martin Luther King once. Remember his famous mountaintop speech, the one spoken only a day before he was shot and killed? In essence, he said this: "I don't know what will lie ahead for me. But it doesn't matter to me now. I've been to the mountaintop."

I hope you are aware of how such sacred times and places have powerfully shaped who you are today. We can't bottle or box such moments in our lives, but we can, we need to carry the memory of them with us in our hearts when we are immersed in our more winter-like times of trial.

The famed psychiatrist Abraham Maslow speaks of the importance of 'peak experiences'. And to borrow a phrase from the rock band, REM, we, by our very nature, want to become God's "Shiny, Happy People". So we seek out those glorious mountaintop moments. When we don't find there are enough natural and authentic mountaintop moments in our lives, we seek out artificial highs and inauthentic radiance. Folks spend a lot of time and money trying to get these – a new face, a new look, a changed appearance, that certain radiant glow. Transfigurations of this kind are big business today. And though we search in wrong places, the longing is itself holy, because each one of us really does need a share of 'God glow' in our lives. So just imagine it: seeing Jesus, bathed in glorious light with both Moses and Elijah simultaneously at his side on that mountain: why it would have been like seeing the 'Mt. Rushmore of heaven' laid out before our eyes.

And yet all by itself, today's story, though glorious and kind of inspirational, is not all that illuminating. In one moment, the light is too blindingly bright to see things clearly, and in the next, all present are enveloped in a thick cloud. In one moment, Peter is babbling on and on with great excitement about how grand it all is, and what they will accomplish, and in the next, he's rendered speechless with quiet awe and humility. During one shining moment, the disciples are seeing this vision on the mountaintop, and in the very next, Jesus has escorted them – and us – back down to the valley where need is so immense.

There's also this very telling part in the story about dwelling places. Peter says he'd like to construct some houses up there on the mountain. He has a desire to take up residency, to establish permanent placement up there with those giants of faith. We too tend to want to capture the view forever, to wake up with and go to sleep with bright, shiny glory bathing us continually.

Once when I paddled my sea kayak out on Puget Sound along the steep banks near Discovery Park in the Magnolia neighborhood, I came to shore amid the remnant bits and pieces of expensive homes that had been built too precariously close to the tops of those high, shoreline sea banks. Those homes are now a pile of rubble at the bottom of those cliffs. Talk about the danger of taking up residency on mountaintops! But it's not surprising that we try to preserve peak moments in our lives, to hold on to them, to live where those magnificent, panoramic cliff side views are always in front of us.

"Peter wanted to fix that transfiguring mountaintop experience in concrete for all time" too. "Let's stay up here forever!" He declares in a state of manic ecstasy. "But fact is, we only get glimpses of holiness and glory." When we get them, whether on a mountaintop in Judea, at a cliffside along the Sound in Discovery Park, or even sitting in a pew on Sunday morning in this humble sanctuary, cherish the moment! Bask in it while you can! Because although an experience of genuine transcendence can be remembered and cherished, it can't be owned or managed, contained or controlled.

And somehow, I get the irony too in the fact that the disciples on that mountain became most deeply conscious of God's glory not during daylight's clear skies panoramic view moments up there, but while enveloped in a thick cloud.

One of my life's most sacred memories was of a time I spent alone on top of a place called Picken's mountain, enveloped in a cloud of fog so thick I could barely see my hand in front of my face. Celtic Christianity speaks of 'thin places' in life, places where earth and heaven meet, or at least where the distance between heaven and earth seems thin. Again it usually happens up on a high mountain, not only because the air's thin and one can barely catch one's breath up there, but also because the sharp edges of a mountaintop, it is said, can

puncture the spirit world. How funny though that it may not be those clear-sky times on a mountain when we can see for miles and miles in every direction that are actually the most illuminating for us. It may be our spiritually thin times, when, physically and emotionally, we're in a thick fog, engulfed in a cloud of disorientation: that may be the more sacred time, the time of true transitioning into the realm of the holy.

The whole point of going up the mountain, after all, is not to get blinded or dazzled by special effects. We still have to know how to function as pretty much ordinary people living in pretty much ordinary places, off the mountaintop, away from the edge of the cliff. Jesus knew that his long-term mission place was back down in the valley. So when Peter asked him, "Can't we just stay up here?" Jesus said "No. We visit the mountain, but we inhabit the valley." We need our profound mountaintop times in life. We also need to know how to sustain our more mundane valley times.

Those holy transitioning times in our lives, that sacred disorientation, can also happen when we do something as mundane as to gather as a family or as a congregation, especially when we're not yet fully unified and clear about something important, but gather to seek God's guidance anyway. I urge you to be patient with yourselves as you go through your own valley disorienting life transition times. Be patient with the clouds and darkness and mystery that surround you during off-the-mountain times too. Be patient with people who may disagree with you. We eventually hear what God has to say to us, our lives get into focus, but it is through a cloud, darkly; it takes time and patience.

We all come back down from our mountaintop experiences, breathlessly carrying the memory of those moments with us. Thanks be to God that we do. But it's back down in the valley, really, that our lives continue to get transformed by the slow, ongoing renewal of our minds and the continually necessary refocusing of our hearts.

Right after worship today, we will be doing something at our Annual Congregational Financial Meeting that is at once both mundane and profound. We will be voting about three things – a proposed addition to our bylaws meant to clarify and simplify our organizational structure, this year's recommended budget, and a go-ahead on a portion of a larger, congregationally-approved renewal plan to purchase LED or computer-managed signage. In one sense we're just doing the mundane 'down in the valley' business of the church here today, but in another sense, I see us as being at a very critical 'mountaintop' make or break time and place. What we decide today matters because who we are and who we can become as a congregation, how equipped we will be to go forward into the future, is very much at stake. I hope we'll leave today feeling we've been to the mountaintop, and that we'll carry the moment of glory we experience away with us. But whether we experience that feeling today or not, I hope we'll continue to go about our valley-time work prayerfully attentive to the will of God as best we know how to discern it; to listen humbly, to speak honestly, and to stay for the long haul as one in our love and respect.

And as we also enter together with our neighbors here this Ash Wednesday evening the holy valley season of Lent, let it be a valley season that remembers the glory on the mountaintop. Let Lent, the lengthening of days, be a season of darkness that looks forward to a yet brighter light, even that of Easter's fullest glory.

God claims us in one holy, shining moment – a moment of revelation, perhaps, on a mountain. We only get a glimpse of the glory, but we are transformed by it. We are transfigured. And then...there's no turning back. We're sent down again to the valley. But we're happy to go there now; more than mere endurance, we can thrive there now. Because we know we've been given the light of God to carry with us into the difficult times

and places. Thanks be to our tremendously-bright shining, gloriously-loving, ever-compassionate God. Amen.