

ON GETTING OFF THE MOUNTAIN – JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION

An Ep7C Feb. 18, 2007 Sermon by Dan Stern – Luke 9:28-36

Today, it all takes place...upon a mountain. The most significant moments in life do seem to happen up on mountaintops (either literally or figuratively), don't they? It's certainly been my own lived experience. Ever since I was a little boy, I've loved to hike up 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. It's that way in the Bible too. 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.

According to Christianity's centuries-old calendar, today is the last Sunday of the Season of Light, or of the Epiphany, the season which follows immediately after the Christmas Season. Epiphany in the original Greek means 'to shine upon', 'to give light to' the people. During the Epiphany season, there is in the church plenty of singing, prayer, and reflection centered around the theme of light shining through our prolonged winter darkness; the season begins with that bright, shining star that led the Wise Men to the baby Jesus, and it culminates with Transfiguration Sunday, today's grand finale on a mountaintop, where Jesus is revealed to us in bright glory as being one with God.

We need our transfiguring, mountaintop moments in life. If we aren't experiencing natural and authentic ones, we tend to seek out artificial ones. And plenty of 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 are big business today. Who doesn't want one? And though we tend to search for these in all the wrong places, each one of us really does need a share of 'God glow' in our lives. We are constituted to want to become, to borrow a phrase from the rock band, REM, God's "Shiny, Happy People". The famed psychiatrist Abraham Maslow speaks of the importance of 'peak experiences' too. Certainly seeing Jesus, bathed in glorious light with both Moses and Elijah present simultaneously, why, it would have been like having seen the 'Mt. Rushmore of heaven.'

And yet all by itself, today's story, though glorious and kind of inspirational, is not all that clear and illuminating. In one moment, the light is too blindingly bright to see things all that 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 in the next, he's rendered speechless with awe. During one shining hour or so, 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 the people are and the need for healing abounds.

And 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 on the mountaintop with those giants of faith. It's a common tendency. We want to capture the view forever, to wake up with and go to sleep with all its bright, shiny glory laid out in front of us. I've paddled my sea kayak a time or two out on Puget Sound along the steep banks near Discovery Park in the Magnolia neighborhood. To this day, I can see the remnant pieces of elegant and expensive homes there that were built too precariously close to the tops of sandy banks. They are now in rubble at the bottom of those cliffs. We try – usually without success – to preserve those peak moments in our lives, to live there with panoramic views and cliffside drama always before us.

“Peter (too) wanted to fix that transfiguring, that mountaintop experience in concrete, to seal it with epoxy for all time.” “Let's stay up here forever!” He declares in a state of manic ecstasy. Peter wanted to capture the moment. Who wouldn't? “But it can't be done. Glimpses of holiness like that come and go. When such a glimpse is given you, on a mountaintop in Judea, (at a cliffside in Carkeek or Discovery Park), or in a Sunday pew in this congregation, cherish it, but don't even try to capture or contain it, for it is a gift, a glimpse, a fleeting, blessed, gift of revelation.” (Willimon)

Now it's also interesting that Transfiguration Sunday – this grand finale, this big shining moment, this ultimate Epiphany, comes right before the more-somber season of Lent. This big change, this major transition in liturgical theme and tone, is no accident. Transitions do have a way of taking place in our own lives, both big and small ones both gradual and sudden ones – and transitions are both perilous and promising. Paying close attention to tonal and thematic transitions in our common worship life can help us deal with our own personal life transitions.

It may seem ironic that we celebrate Epiphany, a season of light during shortest-days Winter, and acknowledge Lent, a season of darkness just as days are getting longer and Springtime is coming into flower. And yet just as day and night follow one another in close proximity, so too do transfiguration and tribulation. “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." (John Prine) We are called by God in Christ to become strong enough to carry the light with us into the dark corners of our lives, as well as to carry the awareness of our capacity to endure darkness into the shiny, happy times.

And somehow, I get the irony of it all that the disciples on that mountain became most deeply conscious of God's glory not during daytime'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 Picken's mountain, literally enveloped in a cloud of fog so thick I could barely see my hand in front of my face. It was so steep and high there, I could barely catch my breath. 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 mountain, because it is said the sharp edges of a mountaintop can puncture the spirit world. But ironically, it may not be those times on a mountain where we can see for miles and miles in every direction. Our spiritually thin times may be those times that physically and emotionally, we're in a thick fog, engulfed in a cloud of disorientation. Don't discount those times, or be too alarmed or afraid of those places. Be patient as you go through your own disorienting life transition times. Because ironically, we always get clear by way of disorientation. We get our lives into focus eventually, but it is through a cloud darkly that we do so.

Still: hopefully each and every one of us can recall at least one unequivocally glorious 'mountaintop experience' in our lives. Can you? And what role have your own sacred times and places played in shaping who you are today? We can't capture and contain these gifts, and yet, we can, we need to carry them with us in our hearts and in our memories.

We will continue to function as ordinary people, living down in the valley, in ordinary places. Jesus knew that the mission was in the valley, not up on the mountain. But we can make that transition back down the mountain. We've got what it takes, or gradually we're getting it, as our everyday lives continue to get transformed by the renewal of our minds focused on the good news of God in Christ.

Remember when it was that Martin Luther King's mountaintop speech was spoken? It was just one 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. Because I've been to the mountain top."

Jesus' return trip down the mountain is the beginning of his fatal journey to Jerusalem. But that no longer mattered so much to him either. He'd been to the mountaintop too.

And when Peter asked him, "Can we just stay up here?" Jesus said, "No. We visit the mountain, we inhabit the valley." To each of us also, Jesus has called or will call, saying it's time to get off the mountain! We can't live up there forever. We need the mountain. We also must come back to the valley. As we say in our United Church of Christ statement of faith, we 'accept the cost as well as the joy of discipleship.' We come back down from our mountaintop experiences, speechlessly carrying the awesome memory of those moments with us.

This coming Wednesday evening at 7:30 PM we gather for the dark but beautiful, simple valley rituals of Ash Wednesday. I urge you to be there; I believe you will find it to be spiritually helpful and a liturgical honoring of the reality of transition. And with the aid of its dark beauty and ironic valley grace, you will, I pray, be transitioned well from mountain to valley with an appropriate mix of disorientation and awareness of having been blessed. And you'll enter the Lenten season, which means in Latin the lengthening of days. Lent is a valley season remembering the mountaintop, and a season of darkness that looks toward the light, leading us in turn toward Easter's brightest and fullest glory.

So do give the Lenten season its due. And though it may be disorienting for a while, it'll eventually prove to be, in a very good sense, reorienting. And having been to the mountain even just once, you'll be able to endure it. It will help you make sense of the cross, and of all the crosses you and I have to bear in life.

But do keep it in mind also, that each Sunday during Lent, is meant to be a little foretaste of Easter – each Sunday, a 'little Easter', a 'brake fast' if you will, especially next Sunday, as new members officially become one with us by baptism and by renewal of baptism. Each Sunday, even each one during Lent, a time of joy and of celebration.

God claims us in one holy, shining moment – a moment of baptism, perhaps, or of revelation 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; we can endure it there now. Because we know we've been given the light of God to carry with us into the difficult times of our lives. Thanks be to our gloriously-loving, ever-compassionate God. Amen.

God, we have come at Christ's own bidding to this high and holy place today, to pray for new assurance that our faith be both clear and plain: So we ask of you God: what do you want us to see here that Jesus' close companions saw on that Mt? Might we too be dazzled by your glory and thus prepared for the night by the vision of that sight? And what do you want us to hear in this place, that Jesus' dear disciples heard? Once again, the voice from heaven – you are God's beloved ones? Strengthen us by glimpsing glory. Give us courage to come back down from the Mt. That our daily lives may prove us people of the loving God we bless.