

On The Mountaintop

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Matthew 17:1-9

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How many of you have ever been mountain climbing? Well, then, I know most, if not all of you have driven through the Hill Country here in Texas and looked out over the vistas. It can be a pretty awesome experience, can't it? If you can catch a break in the tree line, and really pay attention, sometimes you can see that natural transition place of where the sky and the land meet—the horizon.

I want to think with you for a minute about those horizons we sometimes glimpse. For the Celtic Christians of Scotland and Ireland, there is significance to not just horizons, but to all *natural places of meeting*. They were fascinated by shorelines where the sea met the land, the horizon, where the sky met the land, and even by doorways, which were the meeting places of the outside and the inside. These places speak of the junction of boundaries, of transitions from one state into another.

In a similar way, the liturgical calendar celebrates those places. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, a time *between* the times of the liturgical year. It is the

last Sunday in the season of Epiphany and marks the beginning of Lent, which will begin in three days on Ash Wednesday.

Transfiguration Sunday is the highpoint between Epiphany, when the mystery is suddenly transparent through the birth of Jesus, and the resurrection.

A few verses earlier from where I began this reading, Jesus had just told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering and death. So, here it is six days later, and Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up to the top of a tall mountain. They are probably still reeling over what Jesus has just told them about suffering and dying, and suddenly, they can't believe what they are seeing!

Poor Peter. He tries so hard. He wants to be a good disciple, yet nowhere in the disciples' handbook does it say what to do in case of a transfiguration.

It must be a rather unsettling thing, to be out on an afternoon's hike up a mountain, and run smack into a vision. You pause for a moment to catch your breath and take in the view (*bend over like catching breath*), and when you stand up and turn around, what do you see, but Jesus' face, shining like the sun!

His clothes are dazzling white. Is it a trick of the light? Is it a lack of

oxygen? Or—dear God—is it one of those Old Testament mountaintop moments you’ve heard about all your life, happening to *you* now, so that at any moment you will be swept up by fiery angels?!?

Well, I’ve got to hand to Peter. He didn’t lose it and shriek and hide his face, or try to jump of the summit in a panic when he saw his dear friend Jesus transfigured into this figure of light. He was very composed and pragmatic about the whole experience. “Lord,” he said, “it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” You all can have the tents, and all of us can just hang out here forever—it will be great!

But, as Peter was still speaking to Jesus, laying out his plans for the great campsite he was going to build, this booming voice came out of the clouds saying, “This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

Well, that cut Peter short, and immediately the three disciples fell on the ground in fear. They instinctively knew this was God speaking, and the divine presence was almost more than they could bear.

Soon though, a hand rested upon Peter’s shoulder—a hand and touch he knew. Jesus says, C’mon get up. And just like we have heard God saying the last two Sundays—Jesus says again, “Don’t be afraid.” The three got up slowly,

and as they stood up and turned, Moses and Elijah were gone. It was only Jesus standing there. And there, the whole strange scenario ends.

That is the mystical event called Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Whatever else this strange and dazzling event in Jesus' ministry means to you, or however God wants to grab you with this passage, I found embedded in this mystic moment two contrasting pictures of discipleship.

The first is a perfect picture of a world denying, retreatist kind of discipleship. What better example than Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration busying himself with plans for these dwelling places.

For Peter, the most perfect example of closeness to Christ was to isolate Christ far above the poverty, the hunger, and the crime—the everyday life in the valley—the most perfect example of closeness to Christ was on the mountaintop.

Remember, down in that valley, Jesus had just announced to his disciples that he would soon have to suffer and die. I think Peter was just more at home up on the mountain where he could build sacred walls which he could keep Jesus behind, so he wouldn't have to think about that suffering and dying and what life was really like in the valley.

There's something in me, too, that at times feels at home up on that mountain with Peter. Maybe there's something about you too that goes for dwelling places on the mount. That's where we feel good and where we want to hang out.

Up there, on the mountaintop can actually become "in here." In here, in our beautiful church sanctuary and building, away from and above the starving homeless, the wars in the Middle East, the corporate greed, the hate and prejudices and the crime, you and I may be tempted at times to shut out all that yucky stuff that goes on in the valleys of life. It would be nice to hide behind the walls of our church building and set up camp right here so we can be with Jesus all the time, wouldn't it?

In here in on our own little mountaintop, above a struggling marriage, or financial woes, and all the ugliness of the world out there, we may *think* Jesus is hanging out here with us, but I'm not so sure that is always true.

There *is* something in you and me that wants Jesus far away, above the valley of everyday life, something in us that wants Jesus to lift *us* above the pain in the valley.

Let's go on top of that mountain with Peter, James, and John again, This time, instead of scurrying around to set up our secure dwellings to remain with

Jesus far above the valley, what if we **listen**; really listen to what God is saying. “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

What had Jesus just spoken to the disciples that we were supposed to hear—remember? Jesus told his disciples that he must undergo great suffering and even death. God’s beloved demonstrates **His** Sonship by being the suffering servant, not by hanging out on the mountaintop where it is safe.

What God is trying to tell us on the mountaintop is that what Jesus is all about is the valley! Up on the mountain, God confirmed that Jesus belongs in the valley. Jesus can never be locked up in a cathedral or church sanctuary someplace. And a dynamic, true disciple can’t be locked up there on the mountain, either.

If you really want to be with Jesus, if you really want to walk with Jesus everyday, then you’re going to find yourself running toward signals God sends out where God’s at work in Christ already.

If you read on to the next story after our lesson today, Jesus himself takes the disciples away from the glory on the mountain. Jesus takes them to the valley to meet the ones who need them most.

Jesus takes them to the man whose son was possessed by a demon.

Jesus himself leads them down to the bottom of that mountain to hurting people, unbelieving officials, to ineffective institutions and the demons below. Jesus led them down the mountain to the valley where we live today.

The hard, yet exciting truth of the Transfiguration is that coming to know Jesus is coming to know the valley. He's on the road leading to starving children all over the world. He's on the streets with runaway teenagers who sell their bodies for drugs. He's walking right along with all those politicians who are arguing endlessly over healthcare. He's sitting right beside those women who have been abused by their mate.

Christ comes into our hearts when we plunge with him into the healing and humanizing action in the valley where we are called to serve.

When you and I really hear God on the Mount of the Transfiguration, when we listen to him, we're going to hurry down to that valley, and you can be sure Christ will be there greeting us with open arms when we arrive.

Let us pray: Loving God, give us the courage to live in the valley. Open our ears to hear. Open our hearts to act. Encourage us to be your disciples you where you live. Amen.