

First Lesson: Exodus 24: 12-18
Second Lesson: Matthew 17: 1-9
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“The Mountaintop”

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After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. ³ Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

⁴ Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

⁵ While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” ⁸ When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, “Don’t tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

Today is Transfiguration Sunday and the last Sunday before Lent. Transfiguration Sunday is one of those weird festivals in the church calendar, not as well known as Easter and Christmas...not as easy to define as Pentecost or Good Friday. What exactly is Transfiguration? Well, the Oxford dictionary defines transfiguration as “a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state.” In terms of scripture, the Transfiguration is an event that occurs in the middle of Jesus’s ministry. So sometime between Jesus’s baptism and the crucifixion. Jesus takes Peter, James and John and heads up a mountain where something extraordinary happens. Jesus’ “face shone like the sun, and His clothes became white as the light”. Two “heroes” of scripture are there too, Moses and Elijah. It’s mentioned in all 3 of the synoptic gospels and while not specifically recounted, the Gospel of John begins by stating “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” John 1:14. And, in the 2nd Epistle of Peter, the author recounts “For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.” 2 Peter 1: 16-18. Clearly, this is an important event. It’s important because what Peter, James and John get a glimpse of is the glory of God! It’s just a taste though, and in such a way that they were able to comprehend. God has a way of doing that, we find it throughout the

Bible, God reveals Himself in some form or fashion, never as He is Himself but in ways our human minds can understand.

So why all the cloak and dagger? Why doesn't God just show up and let us see Him? God is very clear when He tells Moses that while He may provide a glimpse of His glory "You cannot see My face, for no one may see me and live." (Exodus 33:20). God chooses many forms when He gives these glimpses. I've included all the scripture references in the written manuscript for those of you who may want to go back and review them...but just naming a few there's God being one of the three visitors to Abraham (Genesis 18), there's Joshua standing before the pre-incarnate Jesus as the commander of the army of the Lord (Joshua 5:14). Certainly the angel of the Lord who visited Gideon (Judges 6: 11-23) qualifies as does the angel who visited Manoah's wife to tell them about the birth of Samson to come (Judges 13:1-24) and also Moses and the burning bush...I could go on and on....these are all examples of times when God comes to His people in a fashion that is something they can endure and comprehend. And it's a BIG deal. What the disciples experienced was so extraordinary that only explanation was divine. And it confirms to the disciples a conversation that took place just one chapter previously in Matthew 16 when Jesus asks the disciples who they believe Him to be. Peter's answer "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". It's a marvelous profession of faith to which Jesus responds that it is on this confession that He will build His church. From this point onward Jesus begins to talk to the disciples about what's to come. He's preparing them that soon He will be going to Jerusalem and to His death.

Perhaps it's because of Peter's profession of faith that Jesus chooses Him, along with James and John – the inner circle – to take up the mountain where they experience this strange, supernatural, inexplicable moment, this flash of glory and glimpse of something divine. Not surprisingly, the disciples were stunned, awed and terrified. And what does Peter do? He offers to build 3 tents, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. It isn't actually as silly as it sounds to us. To understand this better, "*skainos*" is the Greek word translated to "tent". When God brought the Israelites out of Egypt and started leading them through the desert, he commanded them to build a kind of portable sanctuary where God's presence would rest and sacrifices could be presented. This sanctuary was in--you guessed it-- a tent. We see them around Lower Merion during the Jewish harvest festival Sukkot. Peter is not suggesting setting up a campsite and making S'mores, what he is doing is the first thing that pops into his practical, Jewish brain for how to honor and welcome these god-like beings. Peter knows this is important. He's been given a brush with the divine and he wants to hold onto it and to understand it. The thing is, a brush with the divine can not be grasped, it can't be understood, it can only be experienced. Peter can't "do" anything other than be present in the awe and wonder. He can't hang onto it, he can't make it last longer and he can't comprehend it.

We call these brushes with the divine "mountaintop experiences." While there are plenty of examples of these experiences happening on actual mountaintops Moses goes up Mt. Sinai (EXODUS 19), Elijah flees to Mt. Horeb (1 KINGS 19), The Transfiguration (MATT 17), The Great Commission (MATT 28)

There are plenty of "mountaintop" experiences that occurred in regular places: The Lord's covenant with Abram (GEN 15), Gideon meets the Lord on the floor of the wine press (JUDGES 6:11), Samson who called on the power of God (JUDGES 16:28-30, Isaiah 6:1, Exekiel 37)

The list goes on. Each has one thing in common: a close, personal encounter with God.

Perhaps some of you can point to moments in your life when you've had an encounter with the divine, your personal mountaintop experience. Maybe it was a miraculous event, something you couldn't explain, or maybe it was more of a feeling, a deep sense of God's presence coming close, an experience of profound peace and comfort. Maybe you've encountered the presence of God in another person, or the encounter was quiet in prayer or in scripture. These experiences happen in all different ways but the one thing they have in common is when you experience it you know you are in the presence of God. Regardless of how we experience them, these mountaintop experiences are important.

Look at it this way...we all know it takes more than puppy love and infatuation to sustain a healthy marriage or build a strong family. It takes hard work, right?! But, if that's all you've got, hard work, well, that's not much fun is it? You need moments of intimacy and ecstasy every once in a while to make it worthwhile, moments you look back on your relationship, smile to yourself and say something like "All of a sudden, there we were, just the two of us holding hands...". As everyone in a long term relationship can attest to, the satisfaction of that one moment can make all the drudgery and day to day hard work worth all of the effort. What gets you through the day-to-day toil and grind of everyday living.

Mountaintop experiences are important but it's not like you can just pick them up at the Wawa. And that's the second point. These experiences are a gift. You can't manufacture them or conjure them up on demand. As often as not they come about without warning, when you least expect them. These experiences are rare gifts of grace, but they're also the catalyst of transformation. Matthew says that Jesus was "transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as the light". Those who've had a genuine mountaintop experience are transformed in the process.

The single most important turning point in my own faith came about 10 years ago. I was with Pastor Lisa in my living room, I can still remember exactly where I was standing. Lisa was praying and while she definitely did NOT light up like a lightbulb, I was overcome with an emotion I can't quite put into words but I know without a doubt it was God. On the outside there was nothing loud or dramatic about it. I've talked about it with Lisa and she says she didn't notice a change at the time but to me I was powerfully transformed. If anyone has doubts about just how dramatically changed my life was from this point on, I'm sure Cass would be happy to share some "Old Heather" stories during coffee hour. What I experience that night, while I may not be able to fully describe it to you, this experience was the catalyst for the transformation of my life. When you've been to the mountaintop, you never see things in quite the same way again.

Just before Jesus climbed the mountain with Peter, James and John, Jesus told the disciples that soon He will be arrested and killed. The time is coming and Jesus had been preparing them for what was to come. The road Jesus is traveling, the road He is asking His disciples to travel with Him, leads to the cross. They will need spiritual strength for the journey ahead. They need this brush with the divine, they need to experience God's presence. What Jesus did was lift the corner of a veil and what His three disciples saw was so powerful that it allowed them to move

back down the mountain and do the hard work of faith. These mountaintop experiences inevitably lead to the valley below. Look what follows on the heels of Jesus' transfiguration: He and Peter and James and John come down from the mountain only to be confronted with a man who had a son with epilepsy and begging Jesus to heal him. There is work to be done and not a moment to spare.

True faith is constantly challenging us, stretching us, calling us. Jesus tells us to take up our crosses and follow Him as He goes to His own cross. We are called to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We are commanded to do justice, to feed the hungry, welcome the foreigner, and care for the most vulnerable among us. And none of it is easy. We're asked to do all of this with only glimpses, brief encounters, with the God in whom we believe. So, when we receive these glimpses, when we have these brushes with the divine, we should treasure them. We should soak them in as much as we can. We need these moments to give us strength for the journey. These mountaintop experiences act as nourishment, they remind us of what it is we are working towards.

I can't think of a better illustration than Dr. Martin Luther King's speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop". You probably know he delivered on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated. Here's the last paragraph:

“Well, I don't know what will happen now.
We've got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop.
And I don't mind.
Like anybody, I would like to live a long life.
Longevity has its place.
But I'm not concerned about that now.
I just want to do God's will.
And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.
And I've looked over.
And I've seen the promised land.
I may not get there with you.
But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.
And I'm happy, tonight.
I'm not worried about anything.
I'm not fearing any man.
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

We are constantly being called into new situations. We are being pushed forward into deeper discipleship, a more profound faith. Hold onto your mountaintop experience but be ready to go back down the mountain and fulfill Jesus' Great Commission to “go and make disciples of all the nations” resting in Jesus promise that “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:19-20) Because that's what God is calling all of us to do. Amen