

Mountaintop Experiences and Valley Living

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

*Luke 9:28-36 [37-43]
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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Riddle me this: I have not preached on this biblical story, known as the Transfiguration of Jesus, since I've been your pastor. However, you have heard me preach on this story before. How is that possible? Any ideas? (Perhaps the former Pastor Nominating Committee might know the answer.)

The sermon was entitled, "Don't Just Do Something, Stand There." I preached it from this pulpit on this very Sunday eight years ago. It was my candidating sermon, after which there was a Congregational Meeting to vote on whether or not to extend a call for me to be your new pastor. I began that sermon by bemoaning the fact that the story of the Transfiguration just happened to be that week's assigned lectionary gospel reading. That's just how it goes sometimes. Interestingly, in the subsequent seven years I have found something else to preach about on the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany. So it's probably time to return again to this rather bizarre story to see what relevance it has for the church and our lives today.

This story was obviously important to the early church because it is recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Though not identical, all versions are quite similar. Here's a quick review. Jesus goes up an unnamed mountain with Peter, James and his brother John. As Jesus is praying he is somehow transformed – the word in Greek is metamorphosis – the appearance of his face changes, and his clothes shine a dazzling white. Suddenly, standing next to Jesus and talking with him are Moses (the great Lawgiver) and Elijah (the great Prophet). This reveals how Jesus is indeed a continuation of these two great traditions in Israel's faith – the law and the prophets.

Peter quickly offers to build three dwelling places for them. He is interrupted, however, when a cloud mysteriously comes and overshadows the terrified disciples. Echoing the same words heard at Jesus' baptism, a voice calls out from the cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen." Yet on this occasion a command is added, "listen to him!" More on this in a moment. When the voice had spoken, Jesus is found to be alone. The three disciples decided not to share this experience with anyone. To this day, is it not hard to share a spiritual experience with someone else?

Crucial to a fuller interpretation of this Transfiguration story is what happens next. The next day, they all come down the mountain and immediately encounter a man who informs them that his only son suffers from a spirit that causes him to have violent seizures. The father reveals that the other disciples who had not gone up the mountain

with Jesus were unable to do anything to help the boy. Jesus then heals the man's son and all were astonished at the greatness of God.

Luke's primary purpose for the story of the Transfiguration is to continue to reveal Jesus' identity as the Son of God. And it reveals a lot of other heady theological stuff that I'm not going to go into this morning – including baptism, the foreshadowing of Jesus death and resurrection, and the apocalyptic hope that comes with all that. I want to focus, instead, on another point, one that you have probably heard before.

“Mountaintop experiences” aren't meant to last.

Peter, in his desire to build three dwelling places, wanted the experience to last. Who can blame him? When you or I have an unexplainable spiritual experience of feeling we have connected with the Sacred Presence in our midst, we want the moment to last as long as it can. After spending a week on the ancient Celtic Scottish island of Iona last year during my sabbatical, I did indeed daydream what it would be like to live there permanently.

But alas, that's not the plan of life. **Jesus basically tells the disciples – and us – that we can't stay up on the mountaintop. We must get back down to the valley where the world needs us.** Though often associated with specific geographical locations, like a real mountaintop or a place like Iona, a **“thin place” where the perceived distance between the material and the spiritual is so small, that can happen at any place at any time.** Sometimes that even happens here during a church service of worship.

It doesn't take long to realize that special “God moments” are all too quickly followed by “real life.” That's the routine, ordinary, day-to-day life that we experience back down in the “valley,” or “in the trenches” where life is lived. That's all part of the sacred journey we travel. **The hope is that those noticeable spiritual moments empower us for living life, and more specifically, for the ministry in which you and this congregation are called.**

It's no accident, therefore, that all three gospel writers immediately follow the story of the Transfiguration with a tale of agony experienced by a father and his son. When read together, we realize that **while some are in the midst of a mountaintop experience, someone else is in dire need.** As Debie Thomas posted in a blog just this week:

The truth is that my mountain lies right next to your valley. The truth is that it is entirely possible for you to sit in church on Sunday morning and bask in the sweet presence of God's Spirit – while one pew over I cry my eyes out because the ache of God's absence feels unbearable.

[Expanding this globally, she asks,] Do we not – in the privileged West – occupy so many mountains, while our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world dwell in valleys of hunger, warfare, violence, and abuse? [Yet] Do we not at the same time experience valleys peculiar to modern 21st century life – isolation, anxiety, depression, frenzy – while many who have less by way of material comfort enjoy the mountaintops of more nourishing cultural traditions and communities?

This is the world you and I live in. And it is the challenge we face as individuals and as a congregation.

Can we hold the mountain and the valley in faithful tension with each other – denying neither, embracing both? Can we do this hard, hard work out of pure love for each other, so that no one among us – not the joyous one, not the anguished one, not the beloved one, not the broken one – is every truly alone?

Suffering, in its myriad of forms, is real. **The good news is that Jesus comes down from the mountain. The good news is that God dwells among us and within us** – not up there somewhere. And as God inspires and uses you and me to minister to those in need, God also inspires and uses others to minister to you when you are in need. That is our desire as we live out what it means to be this particular community of faith known as College Hill. And when it comes to mountaintop experiences, remember that since the Sacred Presence of God is everywhere and in all things, that sense of connection can be found, for example, “in the beauty of creation all around us, and our ability to apprehend it, in the close encounters with new life and death, in a special way during a period of suffering, in praying and meditation, and in church liturgies and music.” (Rex AE Hunt, Transfiguration A, 2011; rexaehuntprogressive.com.)

Perhaps we can be encouraged and empowered in all this by recalling the words of God that came to the disciples from that cloud upon the mountain. Interestingly, after the words, “This is my Son, the Chosen,” comes the only recorded command in the New Testament that is spoken directly by God to humans. God adds, “Listen to him!” These words, **“Listen to him” direct us to the understanding that being a follower of Jesus means not only doing what Jesus does, we are to also listen to what Jesus says.** Unlike Peter who felt he had to immediately *do* something after experiencing the presence of God, we are reminded that sometimes the best response is to simply stand in awe.

Yes, there's a time to act – we talk about that on a weekly basis. But there's also a time for us over-achievers to pause in humble worship when we recognize that we are in God's presence.

Transfiguration Sunday marks the end of another liturgical season. “Having seen the light of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long darkness of Lent. I don't know yet what voices will speak to us in the wilderness. Maybe you'll hear glory. Maybe I'll hear agony,” or visa-versa. Hopefully, though, “we'll hear each other.” Again, sometimes it may be best to take action. Sometimes it may be best to simply listen.

The purpose, whether on the mountain or in the valley, is to be transformed by the presence of God among us and within us.

You know what, I don't think I'll wait another eight years to return to this story.

Amen.