

Going Up the Mountain, and Back Down Again

Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday

Luke 9:28-37
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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In and through his heroic non-violent fight for equal rights and racial equality, the **Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, glimpsed what it would be like if everyone were to live fully into what he called the beloved community – what we might call the realm and kingdom of God.

On April 3, 1968, Ralph Abernathy, VP of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was scheduled to be the featured speaker at the Mason Temple in Memphis. But the crowd wanted to hear King instead, so he was convinced to come and speak. King, never more eloquent, spoke extemporaneously, without notes. It is now called his “I’ve been to the Mountaintop” speech. It is startling in its power and forethought. In his dramatic and prophetic way, King declared to the crowd:

We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. 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. So 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.

The very next evening, King was on his way out of his hotel room to have dinner when he was shot and killed. I realize that Black History Month is February and this is March. But as far as I’m concerned, every month should be Black History Month. **We still have so much to learn, and so far to go to live into King’s mountaintop vision for our society and culture.**

Of all the times when it is good and right to remind ourselves of this particular speech from Martin Luther King, Jr., I think the occasion of what we call the Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday is the most appropriate. This particular liturgical theme is located every year on the last Sunday of the Season of Epiphany, the season when we look at biblical stories that reveal an experience of the Divine in our midst, and specifically, how Jesus reveals God’s Presence.

You may remember me asking on the First Sunday of Epiphany, back on January 7, “Have you had any good epiphanies lately?” Well, a similar question could be asked today in light of this bizarre story of Jesus being transfigured up on the mountain. **“Have**

you had any mountaintop experiences lately?" Those are occasions defined as a spiritual experience, when there is a very real sense of the Sacred Presence of God.

We know, of course, that we are *always* in God's Presence, but sometimes we just recognize and feel it more powerfully than at other times. But, if you're like me, they don't come around too frequently. And they are certainly not something we can generate on our own. They tend to just happen, and sometimes at unusual times and places. In other words, they don't only happen on a mountain, or at a camp retreat or spirituality conference. It could be during a drive to or from home, or while shopping, or at a hospital bedside. Who knows, maybe even here at church.

I want to say a few words about this biblical story, and then address what comes after a mountaintop experience. Let's get the following out of the way right from the start. This very strange story is one that many progressive Christians categorize, to use an old Native American phrase when telling a story, **"I'm not sure whether this really happened, but I know that it's true."** Therefore, some of you may choose to see this story as a literal historical event, and others may choose to see it as a way for the gospel writer to make a crucial point, metaphorically, about his understanding of Jesus' identity and its effects on his disciples.

What does **transfiguration** mean, anyway? The dictionary defines it as a change in form or appearance. This term comes from the Greek word for metamorphosis – a dramatic transformation. There also tends to be an added emphasis on being an exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change. It also can mean seeing something in a whole new light, as in the revelation of something not noticed or understood before – again, an epiphany moment.

So, then, what's the overall purpose of this story? The description of Jesus' entire presence being bathed in dazzling brightness (again, whether literally or metaphorically) was used by the author to express **the interior shining of Jesus' Divinity breaking forth as pure light.**

Standing next to Jesus and talking with him are Moses (the great Hebrew Lawgiver) and Elijah (the great Hebrew Prophet). This is meant to reveal how Jesus is indeed a continuation of these two great traditions in Israel's faith – the law and the prophets. The author intends his readers, his community of faith, to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the one of whom the prophets spoke, the one who fulfills the law, the one who is from God and of God, and to whom they should listen.

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 words heard at Jesus' baptism, a voice calls out from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Chosen." Interestingly, after those words 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 watching and doing what Jesus does, we are to also listen to what Jesus says. The biblical author wants us to understand that Jesus' words, his teachings, have the authority of divine revelation. Therefore, Jesus' words are God's words. Words like, 'love your neighbor as yourself', and 'love your enemies', which we looked at last Sunday. Therefore, unlike Peter who felt he had to immediately do something after experiencing the mystical Presence of God, we are reminded that sometimes the best response is to simply stop, stand in awe, and soak it all in.

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. **Reverence is something we must reclaim.** Evidently, the three disciples up on that mountain with Jesus needed to hear this instruction. Perhaps we need to hear these words and take them to heart, as well.

All this, however, is not the end of the story. Crucial to a fuller interpretation of the Transfiguration is what happens next. As much as we would like to stay up on the mountain and hold onto those mystical experiences, as indicated when Peter wanted to build three booths, or dwelling places, the disciples – and us – **have to go back down the mountain. 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, often messy, sometimes chaotic life that we experience back down in the "valley," or "in the trenches" where life is lived.**

Martin Luther King, Jr. knew that all too well. And I think we do, as well. 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 our community of faith are called. It's no accident, therefore, that the story of the Transfiguration is immediately followed with a tale of agony experienced by a father and his sick son.

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 in a cloud '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 and me when we are in need. That is our desire as we live out what it means to be this particular beloved 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, 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.)

This Transfiguration of the Lord 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 we'll hear glory. Maybe we'll hear agony. Hopefully, we'll hear each other, and we'll hear the words of Jesus.

The purpose, whether up on the mountain or down in the valley, is to be *transformed* by the Presence of God among us and within us. I hope to see you on Ash Wednesday in just a few days as we continue the journey.

Amen.