

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
February 26, 2017
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them . . . (Matthew 17:1-2 N.R.S.V.)

To the Mountaintop and Beyond

Today's scripture talks about Jesus taking his disciples up to the top of the mountain and being transfigured before them! That must have been a great experience. It was one to tell your children and grandchildren. It was such a great moment that Peter wanted to build some booths there, so that they could stay there. Wouldn't we all like to have a mountaintop experience?

I have a friend who once told me, "I have a mountaintop experience every day." He must have seen in my face that I had some doubts. "It's true," he said, "You see, some days I am on top of the mountain and some days the mountain is on top of me." Such a funny man!

One thing is for sure, true mountaintop experiences, like Peter, James, and John had are rather rare. When we do have them, they are wonderful. But they don't happen all that often, and when they do happen, they are a pure gift of God's grace.

In some ways this event is a kind of parable of for every Christian disciple. We might note that this original was not even shared by all of the original disciples, only Peter, James and John got to see the transfiguration. At the same time, there is a parallel here to what all of us experience as we come to Jesus and as Jesus comes to meet us.

Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up to the mountaintop. There before their very eyes, Jesus begins to glow like the sun. Then the two greatest figures in the history of the Jewish faith appear. Moses is the great lawgiver and Elijah is the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. Both of them appear talking with Jesus.

Then when Peter blurts out his desire to just stay there on the mountaintop, the voice of God speaks out of the clouds. "This is my son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

The disciples are so overcome with awe that they can't even move. Then Jesus comes over and touches them. It is interesting that the Greek word used here to indicate that Jesus touched them is the same word that is used in other places where Jesus performs a miracle of healing. So Jesus

heals them and leads them back down the mountain.

I can't help but think about the time that my brother-in-law, Rick said that he had to have a "come to Jesus" talk with his son and his friends. That was the first time I heard that expression but I knew exactly what he meant. He wasn't talking about Christian conversion, he was talking about the kind of talk where you lay it on the line, you cut through the BS and the illusions. Rick told the boys that it was all great and wonderful that they were forming a Christian Rock Band and planning to go on the road with their act. He told them, "you all are going to have to figure out how you are going to pay for all this traveling around."

On that long ago mountaintop, the disciples had a "come to Jesus meeting." They saw Jesus for who he really was. Now let's face it, they needed this. They gave up everything to follow Jesus and so far had very little to show for it. Oh, they had seen him perform some healing miracles, but not all that many. Beside there were a lot of "so called" miracle healers back then. They had heard Jesus preach a good sermon on another mountain, a really good sermon. But then again, there were a number of good preachers around.

The disciples needed to know that their faith was not in vain. They needed something big to validate their faith and their sacrifices. Needless to say, they got what they needed.

Most of us think we need that too. Or maybe I should say, need that again. One pastor commented that the pews of modern churches are full of people who have had a great mystical experience at some point in their lives, and they come to church to try to recapture that moment.

One of the pastors of a mega church commented that it was his goal to bring everyone in the church on Sunday morning into a close relationship with Christ by the end of every sermon. Well, that's pretty good. I'll have to say that I would love to be able to do that very thing too.

Not too long after this mega pastor said that, his wife left him, and he suffered a massive heart attack and had to take an extended leave of absence. One of the other pastors on his staff remarked, "He was trying to pull the rabbit out of the hat every Sunday and it nearly killed him."

So maybe that's why you are here this morning. At one point you had a mystical experience of God. Maybe when you were close to death, or when someone, you loved was very sick. Maybe you were in an accident and miraculously survived. However, it happened. It was great! Just for a moment you had a mountaintop experience. You felt so close to God, everything made sense, and you caught a glimpse of eternity.

So maybe you are here this morning hoping to recapture that glorious moment even for a second or two. If so, let me tell you, I'm with you all the way. I want that to. I want that for you and I want that for me.

So I catch myself wondering, what can I do to make that happen. How can I preach better sermons so that we have a mountaintop experience every Sunday? So here's the thing. I've been

telling my secretary for sometime that I think I need a better computer, one that will write better sermons. So last week my old computer died. Yes, it did. Sad. So Wayne was good enough to order me a brand-new computer. It is a real beauty, state of the art!

So I was disappointed to find out that this new computer doesn't write any better sermons than the old one did. Truly sad.

Back to our text for today, one of the lessons from this passage is that mountaintop experiences are not under human control. The disciples followed Jesus up the mountain and they had a great mystical experience. It didn't happen because the disciples made it happen. And there was nothing the disciples could do to make that moment last longer. It simply happened along the way while they were following Jesus.

The bad news here is that we can't control or manufacture a spiritual mountaintop experience. It is not in our control. The good news is that God can and does give us those mountaintop experiences when God sees we need them. Our job is to savor those moments when they happen and to remember them and draw strength from them when we are back in the valley.

Jesus knew that the disciples would be facing a great time of crisis ahead and that they would need this experience in the dark days ahead.

Notice that Jesus tells the disciples that they are not to tell anyone about this experience until after the resurrection. Maybe he simply meant that it would make more sense then. Perhaps he also meant that they were not to brag about this experience as if they were some kind of super disciples. Mountaintop experiences are not in our control. Whenever they come, they are simply a gift of God's grace.

I remember when I was starting seminary I was talking with other students about their experience of God calling them to ministry. I noticed that those of us who went to seminary right after college had rather tame sounding call stories. The students who came to seminary later in life, those second career students, had much more dramatic call stories.

I remember being rather jealous of those with more dramatic mountaintop experiences. One day I mentioned that to one of the older students. He said, don't be jealous. God gives us what we need. It was much more difficult for me to come to seminary because I had to quit my job and drag my wife and kids to another city. Then he smiled. He said that dramatic call stories come from those who are more stubborn than others. He said, if you keep running away from God, he will start hitting you harder and harder. He reminded me of the story of Jonah.

You remember what happened to Jonah. He kept running away from God's call until he ended up living for three days in the belly of a giant fish. I'm sure that was a moving experience. Even though it happened at sea level, it still qualifies as a mountaintop experience. It's just that most of us don't want that kind of mountaintop experience.

God doesn't give us simply what we think we need. God gives us what he knows we need in order to follow him. Again, thinking of Jonah, that worked pretty well for him. Can you imagine

what he looked like coming up the beach all covered in slime and dripping seaweed? He must have been a sight to see. No wonder the Ninevehites listened to him when he preached.

Looking back at our text, I want you to notice that Jesus led the disciples up the mountain and after the transfiguration, Jesus led them back down the mountain. Many of us want to just stay in that spiritual high spot, but Jesus doesn't allow that. There is still work to be done in the valley.

Mountaintop experiences are not under our control. We are not wrong to seek these experiences or to long for them, but they happen in God's good time, not ours. Mountaintop experiences happen along the way as we keep faithfully following Jesus.

We can't control mountaintop experiences and we can't prolong them. What we can do is remember them and cherish them.

One man tells about being on a tug boat coming back to the shore in a violent storm. He noticed that the captain was trying desperately to keep the boat on course. He was madly spinning the wheel one way and then the other. Every once in awhile he would hold out his hand and sight down it, then he was back to fighting the wheel. After they had made it safely back to shore, this man asked the captain what the holding out his arm was all about. The captain said, "Only when we were at the top of the waves, could I see the shore, so I would take a sighting along my arm then try to stay on that line when we down in the trough."

I thought that was a good metaphor for the Christian faith. We can't stay on the mountaintop, but we can take a sighting while we are there. Then when we are down in the valley, back in the chaos of everyday life, we remember that moment when we could see clearly, and try to stay on that track. We stay on that track until Jesus gives us another mountaintop experience, another glimpse of where he is leading us.

If you are feeling down in the valley and overwhelmed this morning, you won't be able to force a mountaintop experience. If it comes, great! If not, stay on the track you were on the last time that you felt sure you were following Jesus. Stay on track and trust him to provide what you need.

Amen.