



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois

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Mountaintop Experiences

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

Today is Transfiguration Sunday. ...the Sunday before Ash Wednesday. If we were living in New Orleans or Europe we would be in the midst of Mardi Gras...party time...one big blowout before Lent begins,. The word "Transfigure" is an odd word that gets very little use in everyday conversation. In Christian lingo it basically means to transform something by reflecting God's glory and light.

A few years ago, while we were on a vacation in the Rocky Mountains, one of the kids found a stone — a small one, about the size of a half-dollar, with smooth, rounded edges. It probably would have remained there for another thousand years but this one caught my son Seth's eye. It was special. Glinting in the sunlight, it seemed to reflect all the surrounding colors, as though trying to mirror nature. So we took it home and it ended up somewhere in Seth's room.

Then one day, after Seth had moved out, I was in his room boxing up some of the treasures he had left behind and I was surprised to find that sparkly stone lying on the floor behind his desk. The trouble was it wasn't sparkling anymore, it had completely whatever it used to have. Not knowing what else to do with it, I decided to return it to nature by tossing into our gravel driveway, but as I threw it a beam of light struck the stone. As though by magic, it began to transform, once again it began to shimmer and glow. In an instant the beautiful jewel tones shone brilliantly once more. Had they returned? Or had they always been there, dormant, waiting to be released? Then, I noticed that the sun had just peaked out from the clouds. . Apparently exposure to the rays from God's sun were all this poor little stone needed to be transfigured...to come alive and I thought about how true that is for all of us.

Which brings us to today's scriptures: Two men --hundreds of years apart--climbed mountains and in so doing they were exposed to the radiance of God and in the process they transformed the world.. It all began with Moses who climbed Mount Sinai. He had received a personal invitation to do so from God. "Come up here on the mountain," said the Almighty to Moses, "and I will give you tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that you may teach them." And Moses climbed the mountain and a cloud covered it. And suddenly the glory of the Lord filled Mount Sinai, and the cloud remained more than six days. On the seventh day God called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. And the writer of Exodus tells us that in the eyes of the children of Israel the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mountain. Then Moses went into the midst of the cloud to the pinnacle of the mountain. Moses stayed there forty days and forty nights. And when he came down from the mountain, he gave the world The Ten Commandments. What a transformative moment in human-divine history.

Jesus of Nazareth also climbed a mountain, but he did not go alone. He took three of his closest companions with him: Peter, James, and John. And while he was on the mountain, says the writer of Matthew, he was transfigured before them. His face shone as the sun. His raiment was white as the light. And suddenly Peter, James and John realized they were not alone on the mountain. For talking with Jesus there in the wilderness on that mountain were Moses and Elijah the prophet.

It was Peter who spoke up, of course. He said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you don't mind, let's put up three tents--one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

While Peter was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them. Then they heard a voice out of the cloud: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear him." When the disciples heard this voice, they fell on their face. They were terrified, as you might imagine. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, "Arise, don't be afraid." When these poor startled disciples had recovered enough to lift their eyes, Moses and Elijah had disappeared. Only Jesus was present. As they came down from the mountain, Jesus told them not to share what they had seen with anyone until after he had been raised from the dead. I guess that wasn't a hard promise to make. After all, who would they tell? Who would believe them? They had been guests in another world--a world of the spirit as well as the flesh.

The sad truth is we may worship on the mountaintop but most of us live in the valley. So after his encounter with God, Moses came down from the mountain and gave the world the Law. And after Jesus' encounter with God and with Moses and Elijah, Jesus came down from the mountain and gave himself to the world. That is one of the chief characteristics of the Christian faith which separates us from other religions: we believe that Jesus gave himself in our behalf. Even more than that, we believe in Christ, the God of all creation entered into our world and by doing so he personally experienced our heartaches, our weakness, our suffering--and on the cross of Calvary he took the burden of our sin away.

A Sunday school teacher was asking her first-grade class a question to which the correct answer was "Jesus." One little girl called out, "God!" The teacher gently suggested she try again. Another little girl piped up, "Jesus!" When the teacher congratulated her on the correct answer, the first little girl said in a huff, "Yeah. That's what I meant--Jesus. But I call him 'God' for short."

To the world it is a ridiculous idea, to the Christian it is an exhilarating truth: that God so loved the world that God became one of us, to walk where we walk, to experience what we experience, to laugh and cry, to dance and sleep, to dream and sorrow. The One who possessed everything became as one who possessed nothing that we might have a grand inheritance.

A story was told in ancient China about young man who was the son of a veteran general in the army. The young man had never been in battle, but he had thoroughly studied lessons from both war and history. His father, the experienced general, agreed with his son's ideas about strategy most of time, but he never used his son in battle. He told his son: War is a serious business. One simply cannot learn strategy from books. One must have solid experience.

Later, the King gained confidence in his son and sent him to try out his strategies with the country's entire army. No one trusted this young man. Everybody tried to talk the king out of this action, but all failed. The young man was put in charge of military operations. Within days, 400,000 of the Chinese army were slain or captured by the enemy. From then on the Chinese have had this saying: "Never trust a man who knows the war only from books."

God chose to do more than understand humanity from afar. God experienced first hand both the agony and the ecstasy of being human.. As soon as you say, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . ." you have entered into another world--a world in which humanity is elevated in status, yet humbled by the understanding of what salvation cost God.

There is a modern parable. In this parable Jesus goes walking one day along the streets of a big city. He roams rather aimlessly, letting his feet take him where they will--the way you or I might do when we're just out walking. On his walk, he sees many people and many things, but only three stay on his mind. When he returns home that night, God the Father asks, "Did you enjoy your walk today, My Son? Did you see anything interesting?"

Jesus answers, "Oh yes, Father, I enjoyed the walk and three times I saw myself along the way. The first time, I saw myself in a priest walking along with his hands clasped and muttering to himself. He was in much anguish for his people. The second time, I saw myself in a lonely lad who used his 'street smarts' as a means of survival. He was an accomplished pickpocket. The third time was when I saw myself in a woman with a child in each hand. Her husband had left her and she struggled to love and care for her children without the help of their father." Whereupon, the following dialogue takes place between Jesus and the Father. . . .

"When will you ever learn, My Son?" the Father says with a sigh.

"But I did learn, Father," Jesus replies.

"Did I not send you to earth, My only Son, to tell them about My goodness, and My love?" asks the Father.

"Yes, Father," Jesus says, "and I did. But I also listened, and they told Me about their pain."

"Is not their pain of their own choosing?" the Father asks.

Jesus answers, "Father, whatever it comes from, pain is pain."

Sternly now, the Father says, "My Son, You let your human heart carry you away."

"Yes Father, I did," Jesus whispers.

Then the Father smiles, and reaches out and embraces His Son, happy that His son went walking in the big city streets that day. (4)

Moses came down from the mountain and gave us the law; Jesus came down from the mountain and gave us himself.

A new age has been ushered in with Jesus--a new understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. That is why we call it the New Testament, or the New Covenant. Everything changed with the coming of Jesus. that is what the story of the transfiguration is all about. it confronts us with a decision: do we believe Jesus Christ is who he says he is? If we believe that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God, isn't it time we began trusting him with our lives?

John Mowery tells the story of a mountain climber who was desperate to conquer one of the world's great mountains. He initiated his climb after years of preparation. But he wanted the glory to himself; therefore, he went up alone. He started climbing and it was becoming later, and later. He did not prepare for camping but decided to keep on going. Soon it got dark . . . night fell with heaviness at a very high altitude. Visibility was zero.

Everything was black. There was no moon, and the stars were blocked by clouds. As he was climbing a ridge at about 100 meters from the top, this proud climber slipped and fell. Falling rapidly he could only see blotches of darkness that passed. He felt a terrible sensation of being sucked in by gravity.

He kept falling . . . and in those anguishing moments good and bad memories passed through his mind. He thought certainly he would die.

But then he felt a jolt that almost tore him in half. Yes! Like any good mountain climber he had staked himself with a long rope tied to his waist.

In those moments of stillness, suspended in the air he had no other choice but to shout, "HELP ME, GOD! HELP ME!"

All of a sudden he heard a deep voice from heaven. "What do you want me to do?"

"SAVE ME," he cried.

"Do you REALLY think that I can save you?" asked the voice.

"OF COURSE, MY GOD," he replied.

"Then cut the rope that is holding you up," said the voice.

There was another moment of silence and stillness. The man just held tighter to the rope.

The rescue team says that the next day they found a frozen mountain climber hanging strongly to a rope . . . Two feet off the ground. (5)

Someone today in this room is hanging two feet off the ground. You are facing a tough, uphill battle. You are lonely and you are scared. But you have not been able to let go and let God. I pray that you will let go of the rope. You are not alone in this universe. Someone has come into this world from another world. Someone knows what you are going through. He has suffered too. He is who He says He is. He has the ability to transform your world. He can bring the light of God to the dark places in your life. Won't you allow him to shine your life?