

“THERE’S SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT YOU”

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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Transfiguration Sunday

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

A couple of weeks ago, we observed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. On that day, I went over to Wrights AME Church, as I do every year, for a service celebrating his life and ministry. Almost every year, the pastor of Wrights preaches for that service, and he did this year, as well. And somewhere in his sermon, there will usually appear a quote, or a portion of what was, perhaps, King’s greatest and certainly most remembered sermon - the “I Have a Dream” sermon that he preached from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Most of you have heard it, and if you can’t remember it, perhaps you’ll at least remember probably one of the most famous lines of it, where he said, “I’ve been to the mountaintop and I’ve seen the promised land.”

It was King’s way of saying that no matter what happened to him, and of course, at that time, he was always in constant danger - but no matter what happened to him, he had been to the mountaintop with the Lord, and he trusted that all would be well - no matter what. His mountaintop experience with God transformed his life, and strengthened and sustained him through everything that came his way.

Mountaintop experiences like King’s are the focus of both of our scripture lessons today. The first one, recorded in the Book of Exodus, happened to Moses. He went up Mt. Sinai, had an encounter with a burning bush, received the gift of the covenant, the 10 Commandments as we have come to call them, and he was transformed by the whole experience. It was life-changing for him. And it showed all over his face - only he didn’t know it! The scripture says that when he came down the mountain his face was literally glowing from his experience with God.

The Gospel lesson tells us about another mountaintop experience. Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on the mountain with him to pray, and while they were there, something incredible happened. Jesus was transfigured right before their eyes! Luke says that the appearance of him changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then suddenly, Moses and Elijah, appeared, and talked about what was to happen to Jesus.

Now, let me explain what that meant - Moses represented the law, and Elijah represented the prophets - and their appearance validated, if you will, who Jesus was, and what He had come to do. And then, just while the three disciples were trying to absorb all that, they heard the voice of God proclaim, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to Him!"

It was a breathtaking moment for all of them. One writer said that, "the disciples experienced this as an extremely holy moment, where they felt like they were closer to God, and seeing more of God in Jesus, then perhaps they ever had before." (On-line, Bethquickblogspot.com)

And isn't that what mountaintop experiences are all about? Moments when your breath is taken away, moments when you know beyond a shadow of a doubt the presence of God, and the love of God, moments when your heart is stirred, and all is right with the world.

I know many of you have had mountaintop experiences, because you've told me about them. I've had mountaintop experiences literally on top of mountains like the Zugspitze in Germany and Mt. Rainier in Seattle, where you see the vastness and beauty and glory of the hand of God. And I've had mountaintop experiences in worship, when the words of a hymn overwhelmed me, or a piece of music stirred my soul, or the words of a sermon seemed to have been spoken just for me. And I've had mountaintop experiences seeing babies being born, and yes, even being with someone at the point of death.

Mountaintop experiences - moments when we know God is real, and He loves us, and He has given us so much. They are incredible moments, and we, like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, so long to keep hold of them. We don't want them to end. You heard what happened in the lesson - Peter was so powerfully moved by what he was seeing, that he wanted to build permanent structures there to preserve the moment.

We want to do that too, in a way. We never want to let the feelings from the mountaintop go.

But that's not what we're called to do. I found a wonderful poem this week that talks about these mountaintop experiences, what the author calls blessings. Listen to some of its words:

"Believe me, I know how tempting it is to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything is dazzling and clear.
We could build walls around this blessing, put a roof over it.
We could bring in a table, chairs, have the most amazing meals.
We could make a home. We could stay.

But this blessing is built for leaving.

This blessing is made for coming down the mountain.

The blessing wants to be in motion to travel with you as you return to level ground.” (On-line, <http://paintedprayerbook.com>)

You see, that’s what mountaintop experiences are for - to carry with us when we come down the mountain. To carry with us when life is ordinary and mundane, and when life gets tough.

Life was going to get really tough for those three disciples. They were going to watch this Man to whom they had given their lives brought up on trumped-up charges, and cruelly and viciously be put to death on a cross. They were going to be in danger themselves. It was going to be a terrible time after they came down the mountain. That time on the mountain was what would help bear them through it all.

So I would invite us to let their story be our story. To embrace indeed, the mountaintop experiences that God gives us, and cherish every minute of them. But also then, to let those experiences live in us, change us, and carry us.

When life gets hard, remember those moments. When you wonder if you’re in it all alone, remember those mountaintop moments when you knew God and God’s love more powerfully than ever, and let them carry you through your loneliness. When you’re afraid, remember those experiences, and know that the God who gave them to you, is the very same God who is with you to strengthen and sustain you through your fear.

The other thing I want to invite all of us to do is to let the joy and power of those mountaintop experiences show - let others see what God has done in your life in those moments. The Israelites saw what God had done in Moses because his face showed it - it literally glowed. Jesus’ Himself glowed, and the disciples saw God’s power and love. When the disciples came down the mountain, even though they said nothing, people could surely see something incredible had happened to them.

In this world of the ordinary and mundane, the business and the busyness, signs of the holy are badly needed - and you could be that sign. Let your encounter with God show to all the world, that others might want to know the God you know as well.

We can’t hold on to mountaintop experiences, mountaintop moments forever. They’re not meant for that. But what we can do is let them live in us, change us, strengthen and sustain us. We can carry them with us in such a way that we can face all of life confidently, and we can invite others to walk that same walk of faith too.

So I want to finish with a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson. One day a ship was in a serious, serious storm, and in grave distress. The passengers were terrified. They had been told to stay below deck, and not to go anywhere. Well, the longer the storm went, the more hysterical they were becoming, until, finally, at one point, a man disobeyed the orders, went up to the deck and made his way to the pilot of the ship. The pilot was, of course, on duty at the wheel, and concentrating hard to keep it upright, but when he saw the passenger and how frightened he was, he gave him a reassuring smile. Returning to the other passengers, the man said, "I have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well." (On-line, Sermoncentral.com, Tim Zingale)

Going down the mountain to join the other disciples on a trail that would lead to tears, Peter, James and John yet could say, "We have seen the face of the pilot, and he smiled. All is well."

And so can we.

So today, when you come forward for communion, stop for a moment at the rail, and remember a mountaintop moment you've had in your life, a moment when God was so very real that it filled your heart to overflowing. Then give God thanks for that moment, for in your own way, seeing the face of the pilot, and knowing that all is well. Thanks be to God.

Amen.