

Coming Down the Mountain

Luke 9:28-36

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 9:37-43a

February 7, 2016 Transfiguration C

We've all heard the phrase, "Mountaintop experience," and when we hear it, certain memories pop up. Maybe they are literal experiences on mountaintops, where we've walked, climbed, driven, or rode up the top of a peak, and stood there, hardly able to get a breath, because of our exertion, or maybe because of the thin air, or maybe because of the glorious view. You feel on top of the world.

Maybe the mountaintop experience that comes to mind is more metaphorical. We had a wonderful experience that makes us feel on top of the world, that takes our breath away, such as the emotional and spiritual high from a church camp bonfire as the sparks go flying out over a lake; or having achieved a triumph in life, such as graduating from college or getting married or having a baby. In any case, it's a landmark moment; a time of exhilaration and satisfaction, a time of being overwhelmed with awe and joy.

Today we heard a story of a mountaintop experience that Jesus had with his closest disciples, Peter, John, and James. They had climbed a mountain to pray. This wasn't unusual. The Holy Land is a rugged land, and mountains abound. Even their capitol, Jerusalem, Zion, was on Mount Zion, which had traditionally been Mount Moriah, where Abraham had taken Isaac to offer him up as a sacrifice. The mountain that Jesus and his friends had climbed, again, according to tradition, is Mount Tabor, a few miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee, and just a few miles east of Nazareth, his home town. Some time earlier, near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Luke tells us that Jesus had spent the night in prayer on a mountain before calling the disciples. Luke 6:12 says, "During that time, Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night long."

So now again, Jesus was on the mountain to pray.

Why do we hear the story today? Because this is Transfiguration Sunday. It's the last and climactic Sunday of Epiphany, the season of God's self-disclosure. At Christmas we celebrated the birth of Jesus. Then we remembered Christ's baptism, and the voice from heaven, the voice of God which said, "You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Then each week, the evidence has mounted. Jesus called the disciples. He healed, he taught, he forgave people their sins, he calmed the storm, he fed the crowds, he walked on water. When he asked "Who do you say that I am," Peter had responded, "You are the Christ." Then he predicted his own humiliation and death at the hands of the authorities, and after that, his resurrection. How must have this all seemed to the disciples? Jesus was human, intensely so. He felt pity, hunger, weariness, anger. He had friends, and he was a friend. But he was more than human. God worked in and through him in a unique way.

Jesus took his three closest friends, Peter, James and John, up on a high mountain, by themselves. They were used to Jesus going to lonely places such as this to pray. But something more was to happen. This man, their friend, began to look like an awful lot like God. God's glory shone through Jesus and around him. His clothes were so white they glowed like the sun. Elijah and Moses appeared beside him, talking to him. They symbolized the law and the prophets, the foundations of the Jewish faith. The poor quaking disciples must have remembered how Elijah had heard the still, small voice of God after the earthquake, wind, and fire. They must have remembered Moses climbing the mountain to receive the law of God, and how when he returned down the mountain, his face had shone like the sun.

Peter was so overwhelmed and nervous that he started to babble. "Teacher, it's so good that we can be here! Let's build something! Let's put up a monument. We'll make three shrines, one for each of you."

Then the cloud gathered, like the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of flame by night that had led the Hebrew children through the desert during the Exodus. And from the cloud they heard the voice saying, "This is my Son, my beloved; listen to him." They were still trying to absorb all this, the light, the presence of Moses and Elijah, the cloud, the voice, when they realized they were alone with Jesus once more, just as they had been a few moments ago—or was it an eternity ago? Funny how sometimes time seems to stand still.

But time doesn't stand still. Mountaintop experiences come to an end. We climb down the mountain, and life happens. We try and tell people about our mountain top experiences, and they just look confused, or say, "That's nice." We're off the mountaintop, and back to routine; back to the rut; back from the cruise ship to cooking supper and washing dishes. We're back from glory to grit.

The same thing happened to Jesus and the disciples. I can imagine Peter, James and John babbling to the other nine, and whoever else might have been following Jesus at that time, about their wonderful experience on the mountaintop; how God had shown them how Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the prophets; how Jesus glowed in God's light.

Then, back in the valley, it was back to reality. Paul Galbreath describes it this way. "The mountaintop experience of the transfiguration is not a form of escapism. It is preparation for and recommitment to the nitty-gritty work of encountering demonic forces that oppress, subjugate, and hold people captive."¹ (unquote)

And that's just what happened next. They met a large crowd. Many probably cried out for Jesus' attention. One man's voice was louder and more desperate than the others. "Teacher, I beg you to take a look at my son, my only child. Look, a spirit seizes him and, without any warning, he screams. It shakes him and causes him to foam at the mouth. It tortures him and rarely leaves him alone. I begged your disciples to throw it out, but they couldn't." (Luke 9:38b-40)

¹ Paul Galbreath, commentary on Luke 9:28-43a, in *Feasting on the Gospels, Luke, Volume 1*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 271.

Anyone who has prayed desperately over a feverish child can relate to that poor father's anguished words. Anyone who has had a chronically ill, emotionally disturbed, or addicted child can relate even more. There's no pain like the pain that a parent feels for a tormented child.

When Jesus responded to the father, it didn't seem like the response of a caring pastoral counselor. Was his comment at the faithless and crooked generation directed at the disciples who had failed to cast out the demon? When Jesus had sent them out on their mission trip before the Transfiguration, he had given them power to heal and to cast out demons. Had they gotten too impressed with their own power, and forgot that it came to them from God? Had they not been praying enough to keep their spiritual batteries charged? Or was Jesus addressing the crowd who were looking more for a show or spectacle, like an ancient form of reality TV, rather than trying to understand what Jesus was really all about? We don't know. The important thing, though, is that Jesus did drive out the demon, and the boy was healed.

Jesus and the disciples were now down off the mountain, back to "real life." Conflict grew. Misunderstanding grew. The shadow of the cross was a little darker now, because Jesus had made it clear to the disciples that he must suffer and die if he were to conquer death. Wednesday evening we begin our Lenten journey, marking the journey that Jesus would take to complete and fulfill his mission. Whether on the mountaintop of spiritual ecstasy, or in the grind of daily life, each step of that journey would lead to sacrifice, death, and resurrection.

Each Sunday we come to church to worship. Maybe it's not a mountaintop experience, but it is a time when we can lift our spirits, and attune ourselves to God's will for our lives. We can recharge our batteries for the week ahead. When we leave these doors, sometimes we discover, or remember, that life gets messy. Family life, time at our jobs, wherever we end up spending our time and energy, can sometimes wear us down. Yet that's where we're called to be. Through love, understanding, and compassion, we can bring a healing presence to life's messy situations. We can help make God's love visible through our words, our deeds, and our attitudes. Go and make a difference for God. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon