

Glory on the Mountain
Mark 9:2-9 Crossroads Christian Church
2 Corinthians 4:3-6 February 15, 2015
Transfiguration Sunday B

Every once in a while, not very often, not even for saints, we experience a time when God feels very close. Some would call it a mystical experience. We're flooded with a sense of awe and wonder, and often have a feeling of deep peace. Andrew Greeley was a Roman Catholic priest and sociologist, and he has done surveys which show that many Americans have had this kind of experience, but that they're very hesitant to talk about it to others. Why? Maybe they think that others will call them crazy. Or maybe it's just too deeply personal. Greeley also says that lay people who have such experiences are very reluctant to tell their priest or pastor, maybe because they're afraid that this significant religious person will downplay their experience, or explain it away, and the lay people just don't want that to happen. The experience is too precious and too fragile.

These experiences of the Holy can happen anywhere, at the most unexpected times and places. For some people, church camp is the context—you gather around the campfire with people you care about, sing some hymns, watch the sparks fly, and suddenly you're overwhelmed with love and joy. Sometimes it can be at a tragic time, when you feel that you're hanging onto the end of your rope, and suddenly you find an unexpected source of strength and peace, a Presence that gives you courage and perspective. Your inner storm is calmed, like when Jesus calmed the outward storm on the Sea of Galilee.

Sometimes these moments happen around mountains. Maybe it's the rarified air, maybe the majestic scenery, who knows? That's why we hear the phrase, "mountaintop experience." That "mountaintop experience" theme runs all through the Bible. Remember how God called Moses up to Sinai, the holy mountain, to receive the tablets of the law; how the cloud covered the mountain; how the glory of God, God's shining, glowing presence settled upon the mountain, and how on the seventh day, God called to Moses out of the cloud, out of the light. "Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel." How frightening that must have been. How awesome. We use the word awesome so flippantly today that all the real meaning is drained out of it—it means something that can completely overwhelm us with awe, with wonder, and with fear. But in our scriptures today, this awe, this wonder, this fear, all shine through.

In Mark chapter 8, six days before our story of the Transfiguration, Jesus asked the disciples who the crowds were saying that he was. The disciples shared with him the rumors and speculation that they had heard. He was John the Baptist, come back from the dead after Herod had

beheaded him. He was Elijah, the prophet who was supposed to return after the Day of the Lord. Then Jesus asked directly, "And who do you say that I am?" And Peter blurted out just as directly, "You are the Christ." Peter had given the right answer. But then, after this wonderful confession, after all their hopes and dreams were expressed in that little phrase, the conversation took a darker tone. Jesus said more. He explained how he must suffer and die on a cross and rise from the dead. And that if they were to be his followers, they would have to take up their own crosses and follow him; for if they tried to save their lives, they would lose them; but if they lost their lives for him, they would be saved.

Then, six days later, Jesus took Peter, James and John with him onto the mountain to pray. Then, while Jesus was praying, glory came on the mountain, the bright cloud came on the mountain, just as it had been upon Moses at Mount Sinai. Jesus' whole appearance changed; his face was radiant with Heaven's light. Then, suddenly, two figures stood with Jesus. Somehow, the disciples knew, or maybe they were told afterwards, that the figures were Moses and Elijah. Moses represented the Law. Elijah represented the Prophets and stood for the hope of the nation. Luke suggests that they were talking with Jesus about his own departure into glory.

Peter, James and John had been drowsing, and maybe they were having trouble figuring out whether they were still asleep, or were actually witnessing this wonderful scene. Just as Moses and Elijah were leaving, Peter blurted out, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's build three shrines—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Maybe Peter wanted to stay there in the glory of the mountaintop forever. He wanted to preserve the moment. Nanette Sawyer, in the *Christian Century*, describes what happens next this way. "After this moment of illumination and glistening clothing, terror strikes the disciples, and they pass into the shadows. A cloud overshadows them. And in this cloud of unknowing, they are finally able to hear God—this moment in the shadows changes everything. Suddenly, looking around, they see things differently. Mountaintop experiences, it would appear, are not all sunshine and light. Sometimes it's our entering into the shadows that transfigures us."¹

The bright cloud reminds us, as it did the disciples, of what had come upon Moses at Sinai. Then came the voice from heaven. "This is my Son, whom I dearly love." God was restating the words from Jesus' baptism. But then God added three words: "Listen to him." Was God reminding Peter that Peter was babbling, that Peter would do better to listen, to think before speaking? At any rate, the light had dimmed, the cloud of glory was fading into wisps, and Jesus was standing there with his three friends. The holy

¹ Nanette Sawyer, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, February 4, 2015, p. 18.

moment had come and gone. But the holy One, Jesus, was still there with them.

Sometimes we wish that we could stay in the holy place, the holy time, the holy Presence forever, but the moment passes and we have to go home, to get on with our lives. But we don't have to leave those times and places there, in one sense. We can take them with us. The light from those times continues to brighten our lives, and we hold tight to that light, maybe holding the memory of out and letting it sparkle before our faces, like light refracting off the facets of a jewel. The light from the Transfiguration helped the disciples get through the darkness of the days and weeks ahead. For from this mountain, Jesus and his followers began the journey to Jerusalem, the journey that would lead into the darkness of hatred and evil; to the time when the afternoon sky would be darkened as their Messiah hung upon the cross. So it is that this story of the Transfiguration can be the light we can hold onto as we begin our Lenten journeys. We have seen something of the radiance of God's love, and we can hold it, trust it, and be strengthened by it. Paul knew that, and that's why he wrote to the Corinthians, "God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ."²

I have a friend, a lay preacher, who is blind, but who can remember what it was like to see. One day, we were in the sanctuary at Northside Christian Church in St Louis. He was sitting in a pew near the sanctuary wall, and light from a stained glass window was shining on him. He was smiling. "Can you feel the warmth of the window?" I asked. "Yes," he said, "it feels good. What color is the window?" I responded, "Some red, mostly a deep, rich blue." His smile broadened. "Blue, I remember that. It's a beautiful color." Even though he could no longer see light, my friend had held onto the light.

It must have been like that for Peter, who tried to remember that light during the awful, dark days that followed. He would stumble; he would fall; he would even deny that he knew Jesus. But at the Resurrection would come a whole new beginning. He would go on to be a leader of the church.

What about our own holy moments? If we've experienced them, this story reminds us that we can celebrate them as gifts from God; that we can treasure them and hold tight to them, and find in them sources of strength when life gets tough. If we haven't experienced them, we can realize two things. First, we can't force them or fake them. But we can work on becoming more aware, more sensitive, more discerning, because you never know when God will surprise you. We can appreciate these special moments when they come, and say yes to them.

² 2 Corinthians 4:6, CEB

May God bless you and be with you in all the days of your lives, at the communion table, on the mountaintop, in the dark and dreary places, and in the valley of the shadow of death. Ultimately, you will come to know in full the glory and joy of God's presence. Amen.

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