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The Transfiguration of Our Lord

February 11, 2018

“The Down Side of a Mountain Top Experience”

(Mark 9:7-8)

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“And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, ‘This is my beloved Son; listen to him.’ And suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only” (Mark 9:7-8).

Collect: O God, in the glorious transfiguration of Your beloved Son You confirmed the mysteries of the faith by the testimony of Moses and Elijah. In the voice that came from the bright cloud You wonderfully foreshowed our adoption by grace. Mercifully make us co-heirs with the King in His glory and bring us to the fullness of our inheritance in heaven; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience, something that made it so easy to believe in God and so easy to thank and praise him? Maybe it was the birth of your child, and you felt as if you brushed up against the creative powers of God. You were just in awe, and so humbled by it and profoundly grateful to God.

Or maybe you brushed up against a disaster. You almost fell from a lethal height at work . . . or a car drifted across the center line into your path, but somehow you were spared. And you earnestly praised God and thanked him.

Some of you have been in the hospital, not far from death, hardly aware of what was really going on. But your friends and family were praying for you, your church was praying for you, as were other churches scattered across the country, Christians from across denominations, they were praying for you too because someone knew you and asked their pastor to include you in the prayers and to this day you are convinced you could *feel* it when people were praying for you. It's mysterious and you have a hard time describing it, but you know it as sure as you know anything: you could feel people praying for you.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? It's kind of hard communicating it to others, isn't it? You tell them your story and they might "one up you" describing a near miss they had. Or worse, look at you a little funny, as if you've lost your marbles.

Have you ever had a mountain-top experience followed by the disappointing life in the valley? Up there

it's bright and the snow sparkles and all seems pure and holy and faith is sure and it's just you and God. But the valley is full of complex people and messy situations and ugly, black slush and toilets that need to be fixed and faith that is ambiguous. We'd prefer to linger with God, up there, on the mountain top. But he keeps leading us back down into the messy valley where life is lived.

It certainly happened that way with Moses. When Moses encountered God, it was on top of a mountain, with fire and clouds and mystery and the face of Moses shines. God gives Moses the Law, the Ten Commandments. But while Moses is up top meeting with God, the people down in the valley are living it up. They've pooled their resources, including their earrings, melted it all down and constructed a golden calf. As Moses struggles down over the rocks of Mt. Sinai clutching two stone tablets, he hears the sound of music and people dancing – a party, in full volume, and he breaks the stone tables on which were written the commandments and burns the golden calf. Quite a disappointing comedown from that mysterious and exquisite time on the mountaintop with God.

The downside of a mountain top experience also happened to Peter, James and John. The text says Jesus led them up a high mountain and there he was transfigured before them, which means his appearance of Jesus changed . . . dramatically. We say transfigured. The Greek says “metamorphothe” from which comes our word “metamorphosis.” Matthew says his face shown like the sun, and his clothes became radiant; Mark says, intensely white, whiter than anyone could bleach them. Moses and Elijah, long dead, also appear, and talk with Jesus. How they know it's Moses and Elijah the text doesn't say, but somehow, they know. Then, Peter starts saying something about building three shelters, because that's what Peter does when he's wound up: he starts talking without really having a good plan for what he wants to say. And then there's a bright cloud that envelops them all and a voice from within the cloud says, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” And

then . . . just like that, it's over. Moses and Elijah are gone. The cloud has disappeared. The voice is silent. The text says "they no longer saw anyone with them but Jesus only."

Jesus only. And you get the sense they're a little disappointed with the fact. They saw Jesus only. His face no longer shining like the sun; his clothes no longer radiant, no longer intensely white. Now it's just the same old Jesus again. It's Jesus only, and it's a letdown for Peter, James and John. They're back to the old, everyday Jesus. No more glory. In fact, Jesus starts leading them down from that mountain into the valley where there are sick people waiting for them and demon possessed people and skeptics and opponents and enemies.

On the way he charges them not to tell anyone what they had seen, until he has risen from the dead. So, they can't even share the experience with others. Even worse, he start's talking about death again! They hate it when he does that. They particularly hate the word "cross" which he's been using lately. It seems he as an irrational fear about crosses, as if he's fixated on them somehow. In fact, Peter tried to reason with him, tell him that "yes, crosses are real, and crucifixions are real, but the chances are slim it'll ever happen to you, and besides, we're not going to let it happen, are we boys?" And that's when Jesus let him have it. "Get behind me Satan. You do not have in mind the things of God but the things of man."

In short order they went from glimpsing the glory of God at the top of the mountain, to talking of crucifixion and death at the base of the mountain. One extreme to the other: how very disappointing! Almost immediately, they encounter a noisy crowd looking for Jesus. It includes a man who has brought his epileptic son to the disciples: Jesus heals the boy and the crowd is astonished.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? They're nice. But they're unpredictable and you can't force them, and try as you might, you can't hold on to them either. Sooner or later the glory fades. Sooner or later you have to come down. Sooner or later faith settles into its murky

routine. We can be thankful for those mountain top experiences when we know what we believe, when our faith is strong. But for those in-between times, when life is noisy and dirty and hurried, were going to need something more than just a memory of an experience or of a feeling. We're going to need the truth of God's Word, and the certainty of his promises. For the feelings vanish and the experiences fade, but the Word of the Lord endures.

Besides, we're pretty useless to the Lord on top of the mountain. He wants us with him, down in the valley where there are crowds of people. That's where the energy and momentum of these stories lead . . . down, down from the mountain top, down in the valley where the people play games and dance around a golden calf; down where there are crowds of noisy people and fathers and mothers desperate over their children.

If the disciples didn't get it before, they must have that day. The momentum of discipleship is always down from the mountain top to the city, the streets, the people below. That's where you'll find Jesus, and that's where he wants his followers to be.

Finally, there may be mountaintop experiences now and then, but they are punctuated with long periods of deep trials: turmoil at work, challenging relationships, stress, disappointment. To get through these we're going to need something more than just a powerful experience of God. We're going to need weakness, the weakness of God's Son on the cross. To get us through sin and death, we're going to need the Jesus whose clothes are not radiant, but filthy and bloodied. We're going to need the Jesus who is not surrounded by Elijah and Moses, but the one numbered among the transgressors, with thieves on either side of him and mockers all around. To get us through sin and death, we're not going to need the Father who is absent and silent and the Son who cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We're going to need the one who cries out, "Father, forgive them."

It's in the valley where Jesus did his most important

work, and it's in the valley where we do our most important work, where we live and move and have our being . . . in the office, the living room, the committee meeting, on the factory floor, within our families, our marriages. It's in the valley where Jesus wants us to be; where we are called to live for him, to be his hands and feet and heart. It's to the valley where he gently leads us, and walks with us. All praise to him!

