

Mountaintop Experience – February 26, 2017 – Mathew 17:1-9

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? And by that, I mean, have you ever had one of those God-moments, where everything seems perfect. Fears and doubts slip away, the path forward is clear, and you feel supported by God's presence with you. In the churchy world, you often hear of mountain-top experiences happening to youth who go off to church camp and experience God in a powerful and moving way, and they become fired-up for Jesus. Or sometimes you'll hear about them happening to people after a mission trip. They're in a new place, surrounded by others, who, like them, are working hard to do some good in the world. Everything else melts away except the good work that is being accomplished.

I had one of those moments on a mission trip to Alaska back in the early 2000's. I had been wrestling with the question of whether or not to pursue ministry again. I had had some difficult experiences with the Southern Baptists, and though I had finished seminary, church work was no longer in my future. My calling to ministry was gone.

But I'd been hanging out with the Presbyterians, who were not so subtly trying to get me to rethink my decision. To appease them, I looked into what it would entail to be ordained as a Presbyterian pastor. It would take a few years of completing the requirements, which wasn't really my main concern. From the Baptists, I had learned the hard lesson that church people are not one big happy family that love each other and live life singing praise songs. I realized that church work would have its challenges.

So while in Alaska, our mission team was working on an island, and early each morning I would walk down to the beach and out to the end of a long pier to read scripture, pray and journal. It was a perfect spot to feel the ocean breeze, hear the waves, and watch the fishing boats go out. One morning everything became clear. My call to ministry was renewed. I am not really sure what happened in that moment of clarity, but my path forward was cemented. As I got up and turned to go back to shore, I saw the bald eagle. There was a tall pole a few feet away, and the eagle was perched at the top. I was in awe at the sight. One of my mission teammates had been watching from the shore and taking pictures. She told me the eagle had been there behind me, the entire time.

The phrase mountaintop experience comes from various bible stories where people go up to a mountain and have an experience with God, or epiphany. Our scripture lesson from Exodus describes the epiphany that Moses had when God called him up to Mt Sinai to receive the Law. It is fitting that on the final day of the Season of Epiphany, we have scripture that highlights two biblical epiphanies. In fact, as we look at these two stories we see many similarities between them. As I've mentioned before, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew saw Jesus as a fulfillment of the Hebrew Scripture and often makes reference to them. Both stories refer to a period of six days, both occur on a mountain, both include witnesses to the event, and both set the experience of God within a cloud. Oh, and Moses appeared in both.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is a familiar story. It was important enough that it was included in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. And we hear this story every year on the Sunday

before Lent begins. Today I want to focus on the reaction of the disciples. To set the story in context, just prior to this event Peter declared Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus told Peter he would be the rock upon which Christ's church was built. Then Jesus began to tell them about his upcoming suffering and death at the hands of the authorities, but he would be raised three days later. This of course didn't make sense to the disciples, because in their understanding the Messiah had worldly power. Jesus had been teaching them a different way. God's way.

So up the mountain they go – Jesus and the inner circle of his disciples, Peter, John, and James. High up on the mountain Jesus was transfigured before them – shining face, dazzling white clothes – and if that wasn't strange enough, suddenly two major figures of Israel's history appeared – Moses and Elijah – and they began to talk to him. Now despite their obvious shock at what was happening, Peter suggests setting up some tents so that they could stay awhile. After all, who wouldn't want to hang out for a time with Moses and Elijah? Why not bask in the presence of greatness? This was much better than the worries and struggles in the valley below.

But then a cloud enveloped them while Peter was still babbling on about camping, and a voice from the cloud called out, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Now these fine Jewish boys knew their history. In light of all that was occurring around them, a sudden bright cloud enveloping a mountain could only mean one thing – God was present. They responded in the most natural way possible. They dropped to the ground in fear. Wouldn't you?

But in this event, Peter, John and James received confirmation that Jesus was not your everyday itinerant rabbi. They suspected he was the Messiah, but here, with their senses buzzing from the activity around them, was the definitive epiphany. On this mountain top they experienced God. And they fell to the ground in their fear. Then Jesus reached out to them. Jesus touched them, and told them to get up. He told them, do not be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw only him.

So what happened here? The disciples had an epiphany. They experienced God on that mountain. And God told them to listen to Jesus, to do what he said. They witnessed something that changed their lives. Nothing would ever be the same again. How could it? With the realization that came with the event, that Jesus was more than they could have ever dreamed or imagined. He was their future. They could never go back. They could not un-see what they had seen. They could never go back to their life before Jesus. They could only go forward, following where he led them. Learning to give up the worldly way and pursue God's way. One biblical commentator wrote, "Business as usual is no longer possible after you have seen the vision of God's good future revealed to us in Jesus Christ." (*Feasting on the Word, Matthew* vol. 2, p. 67)

Over the past few weeks as we have looked at the Sermon on the Mount, we have been getting a foretaste of that good future. The vision of life in the kingdom of God is very

different than the lives we see played out around us. The values and principles that Jesus teaches us about God's kingdom are at odds with what the world values. To follow Christ is to choose to follow the better path. And oftentimes it is difficult to continue on the journey when we are bombarded by differing voices. The voice of God gets drowned out by the raucous voices of the world.

C.S. Lewis was a writer who converted to Christianity after being an atheist. He wrote the well-known children's books, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. These are fantasy books that include talking creatures as well as humans. There is one character who is a great lion named Aslan. In these books, Aslan represents a Christ figure. In one story Aslan says, "Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly. I will not often do so in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the signs which you have learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearance. Remember the signs, and believe the signs. Nothing else matters." (Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, p. 25-26)

As we continue on our journey of following Christ, keeping his teachings in our sights is key. We know that justice and mercy, compassion and equality are values of God's kingdom. We know that God loves all people, not just a chosen few, including those who we would categorize as unloveable. We know that God has great concern for those who live on the margins of society – those who are oppressed and victimized. We are reminded to care for the needy and the lonely, to strive to make sure that all people have access to the resources of this world, that they aren't hoarded by those who live in fear of scarcity. There are so many who long for hope and who hunger for righteousness. We are on the journey to bring the light of Christ to those who need it. It's a hard path. But once you have seen the way, you can't un-see it. Once you have had the epiphany, you can only move forward.

I'll close with a portion of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last speech - "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."