

"Spiritual High Places" – Mark 9:2-9 – February 14, 2021

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In the liturgical calendar, Transfiguration Sunday is the final Sunday in the Season of Epiphany, and not surprisingly, it contains a powerful experience of an epiphany. It was a defining moment in the ministry of Jesus, found in three of the four gospels.

Jesus leads three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, on a mountain hike which culminates in a rather startling event. The three disciples are surprised and astonished by what they see and hear. Elijah and Moses appear out of nowhere and begin talking with Jesus. Seeing these two pillars of Israel's history is profound in itself, but then they witness the changing color and brightness of Jesus' clothes and the appearance of a massive cloud on the mountainside. Add to that the booming voice of God reverberating across the sky, and you can understand the awe and fear of the disciples.

But then suddenly, the scene returned to normal; all physical evidence of the encounter disappeared. The four men hike down the mountain. I wonder, as they journeyed back, did they talk about what they had seen and heard, or did each one silently question his own sanity. Perhaps this was just a hallucination. Maybe a prophetic vision. Maybe a dream. But then Jesus confirmed the experience, ordering his disciples to remain silent about what had happened. It really did happen. And with that realization, the disciples lives were changed.

Jesus was transfigured on that mountain – an outer manifestation of his identity and place in God's plan of redemption. The disciples were transformed. Their lives took on new meaning, new direction. They may not have fully understood what had taken place. But they knew it was something big. And following Jesus wasn't just following some random teacher. Following him meant following God.

I can imagine them, years later, looking back on that event – that moment of epiphany, of truly experiencing the presence of God. The fear of the moment was replaced by a powerful impression of awe and wonder. Perhaps it became a great motivator for them or offered strength in times of weariness. There was something significant about that experience with Jesus up on the mountain.

The profoundness of this event as described in the gospels, and other similar stories, such as Moses talking with God up the mountain to receive the Law, has birthed the phrase "It was a mountaintop experience." Perhaps you have used this or have heard others use it to describe any type of epiphany event or "God moment" that happens in life. In those times when the presence of God is felt profoundly or intensely, and, because of those experiences, our lives change. We are transformed. The changes elicited by these encounters with the divine are varied depending upon the person or the situation. Sometimes they spur us into pursuing a deeper relationship with God. Perhaps we feel a sense of affirmation for the path God has presented to us in our lives. Perhaps an answer to a significant prayer has been revealed to us. Perhaps we are given sense of mission to pursue part of God's will in the world. Whatever it is, the experience of the divine has somehow changed us in a significant way.

For Jesus himself, the Transfiguration gave him the assurance that he was on the right path. Just as in his baptism he was claimed by God in the voice speaking from heavens, on the mountainside, God's voice from the cloud gave him the affirmation he needed to continue moving forward. His journey back down the mountain, back into the valley, was a foreshadowing of what was to come in the not so distant future. He sensed what was coming, and in this epiphany moment, he knew that God was with him.

While the mountaintop type epiphanies are thrilling and powerful, we cannot remain on the mountain for very long. We have to come back down to the real world of daily living. We may have those types of experiences as adolescents at a Christian Camp like Pilgrim Center, or as adults on a spiritual weekend retreat, or on a special trip far away from home. It's easier to come into contact with God during one of these focused events, because they are often structured in such a way to facilitate the transforming moment. We're not bogged down with the distractions of life at home, so we can relax and listen for God to speak to us.

Numerous times have I heard people describing this kind of powerful experience, that was for them a life-changing moment. Immediately following the transformation, they seem infused with energy and determination. Yet it doesn't take long before the drudgery of daily living creeps back in, and the God-focused excitement begins to be overshadowed by worldly responsibilities and time constraints. The epiphany moment fades over time.

We continue on, seeking out another mountaintop event, hoping to reclaim that powerful feeling. But transformation doesn't just happen up on the mountain. We can find ourselves greeted by those God-moments in the unexpected places of life. On the long journey of faith, as we remain committed and persistent in following the path placed before us. Or in the seemingly random places that lie outside the boundaries of what we would consider the Promised Land. Or in those times of grief and powerless, where we experience some of our greatest vulnerability, when our defenses are down and suddenly God slips in and we find purpose and hope in God.

Transformation can occur at any time in our lives. In the high moments when the energy and excitement of a particular experience can reveal the presence of God. Or in the low moments of our deepest pathos and helplessness when God comes in bringing new hope and purpose. Or even in those moments in between – in the long journey of faith, where persistent focus on the path placed before us can reveal the subtle workings of God in our lives. They can even occur in the midst of a life-altering pandemic.

As we head into the season of Lent, may we be ever open to those transforming moments along the way, no matter how big or how small. No matter how powerful or how mundane, let us listen for God's voice in our lives.