

A Mountaintop Peek

Transfiguration Sunday

Luke 9:28-36

Slide: Dad, Carol and Me

When I was a kid, our family would often go up to Paradise at Mount Rainier National Park, since we lived not far from there. The drive was about an hour and a half, so if you left at dawn, you were there in no time at all to get in a good hike before coming all the way back down the mountain. One occasion was when I was in high school.

My Dad packed us up for a big hike with backpacks, lots of trail food, and we made the trek, but this time, we did a very special hike that was very popular with mountain climbers. It's called the Camp Muir hike. Camp Muir is the base camp for the climbers who would climb Mount Rainier the 22 miles in snow to the summit. But, to get to Camp Muir, you had to hike 9 miles first from Paradise Lodge.

Camp Muir takes roughly 9-10 hours to hike to the top and back down and that doesn't even count if you plan to stay up there for any duration. That particular hike is strenuous, gaining an elevation of about 5,000 feet and what comes up, must come down. The hike back down was likely just as hard, at least on the knees!

Slide: Camp Muir

However, it was an amazing experience, a mountaintop one, even though it was still another 22 miles to the mountaintop. But, there are hikers and there are climbers. You could only hike to the base camp – beyond that was a whole other scenario. That's the closest I ever got to climbing Mount Rainier and watching the climbers go up ahead of us for those 22 miles to the top was somewhat awe inspiring. These kinds of moments stay with you forever.

Slide: Mount Hermon

Similarly, the day probably began in a very

ordinary way when Jesus asked three disciples to go up a mountain to pray. Likely, they got up at dawn or before dawn for Jesus had a desire to take time to rest and possibly have time away from the crowds who had been pressing upon him. Sounds pretty ordinary but, let me tell you, this is no ordinary mountain. It's also no ordinary hike! In fact, it makes Camp Muir somewhat pale in comparison. The name of the likely peak that Jesus was transfigured upon is called Mount Hermon. From where they had been earlier to where they were going would have been a 9,000 foot hike to climb to the top.

Slide: This is my chosen

One would think that once arriving to the top, that they would have taken a breather, eaten some dates and figs, and drank some water while taking in the astounding view before attending to the practice of prayer that Jesus originally intended. But, no sooner than they arrive and being to pray that Jesus is suddenly

transfigured into a beam of bright, dazzling light, talking to two of the most important prophets Moses, the keeper of the law, and Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. Then, out of the blue, God the Father says from within a cloud that instantly engulfs them, "This is my Son, my CHOSEN - Listen to him!"

No, this story is anything but ordinary. In fact, it's that mountaintop experience so much so, that these disciples couldn't even speak of it they were struck so much by it. And, it's the kind of experience where you suddenly realize that God isn't a figment of your imagination; that it's not altitude sickness but God *is* there and the sudden knowledge of that changes you.

Slide: Lawn chair Flight

There is a true story about a man named Larry Walters who one day in 1982, while sitting in his lawn chair, decided that his dream to fly just had to become a reality. As a truck driver, he really

didn't have the money to take flying lessons, and since he lived in an area where hang gliding was really out of the question, he decided instead to take things into his own hands. He really wanted to fly. He wanted to feel what it would be like to float in the air.

So, he took that old aluminum lawn chair that had the webbing that most lawn chairs had in the 1980's, hitched to it 45 helium-filled surplus weather balloons, put a CB radio in his lap, tied a paper bag full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to his leg, and slung a BB-gun over his shoulder to pop the balloons one by one when he wanted to come down. He thought he would go up maybe about a couple hundred feet, but instead, he went 11,000 feet where all the planes make their approach to the LA airport.

Sure enough, he shot each balloon until he landed on the ground, where he was promptly arrested, because after all, he was stupid to do such a thing like that. But,

when the press asked him why he did that, he said, "Well, you just can't sit around all the time, can you?" And then when asked if he was afraid while up there, he replied by saying, "Yes, but wonderfully so."

Larry had a mountaintop experience, the kind that gives you goose bumps, the kind that makes you feel alive, the kind that actually should have ultimately killed him but didn't.

Slide: Mountaintop

It had to be the same feeling for Peter, John, and James. Up on the mountaintop, they were given a glimpse of who God really was, even though they didn't understand it until Jesus rose from the dead. They saw all at once Heaven and Earth, and God's divine self. The Divinity of GOD present. For one shining moment, very brief, they witnessed the Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How do you come down from that? And, why would you want to come down from that? Wouldn't you want to stay on the mountain forever?

I think that hopefully all of us here can relate to something in our lives that gave us sort of mountaintop peek, that kind of experience, and when I say that, I don't mean necessarily a religious moment. I can remember many times reaching the top of a peak in Washington State and feeling the immense satisfaction of achieving that. I know what it's like to reach a certain goal that you weren't sure you could. Those are mountaintop experiences. You could probably relate some story that gave you the same awe inspiring feeling.

But, to have an experience of God that is just so obvious, staggering, and amazing, like the disciples did on that mountain, can we all say we have had that kind of experience? No. Some people can. Some people can say that they had something happen to them that caused them to

experience God in their lives and in an awe inspiring way, but not all of us. Even I long for that possibility, but my reality continues to be similar to yours, I see God in brief, little God Moments, if paying attention just enough.

Slide: God Moments

I can remember studying this Gospel reading from Luke very clearly at St. Paul's Church in Oakland, California. I had been assigned to that parish as a seminary student, and we studied the Transfiguration together one Wednesday evening. Some of the people could relate a story that gave them a sudden sense of God in their lives, but I remember one person's comments in particular.

I don't remember his name strangely enough, but he said, "You know, I come to church here every Sunday. I haven't had *any* experience of God. But, I come because it's obvious that other people are experiencing God, and I am hoping and longing that one

day I will. And, that is why I come here.”

It’s no mystery that a person would say something like that. What do we actually expect is an experience of God anyway? I never had a great call story to explain my entering into seminary. I knew I experienced God, but it wasn’t a mountaintop peek. In fact, many people don’t have the transfiguration like story in their lives.

They experience God often in ways that are very ordinary, through people, nature, and believe it or not, the sacraments, that while Holy Communion and Baptism are extraordinary events, ordinary things like bread, wine, and water is what’s used to make the extraordinary happen.

This leads us back to the mountaintop where Jesus shines brightly. Jesus didn’t stay on the mountaintop even though Peter was ready to put up three tents for them. No, just as soon as it was over, they went back to life and ministry. Peter, James, and

John even practically forget about it until after Jesus rises from the dead. The mountaintop experience doesn’t change the disciples at all, at least in the present time of their lives. Only when looking at it from their future, after the death of Jesus, can they really see that experience clearly.

Which means that life, ministry, and the experience of God mostly occurs in the valley. It is the day in, day out struggle of faith, living the life God gave us, following the way of the cross, and not the mountaintop of glory, because even if we have seen the mountaintop, we still have to come down. And, even if we never have the awe inspiring, jaw dropping experience of God we hope to have, we still can experience the fullness of God in our daily lives. For God is present in both.

Scottish theologian Henry Drummond once wrote, “God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited. God does not make the mountaintops for us to live on the mountaintops. It is

not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below. But we don't live there. We don't tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below."

Slide: A Mountaintop Peek

Having a mountaintop experience of God is like no other. It's a time in life when the brilliance of God's light enters your life. But, if your hope is to stay on that mountain forever, or continue to have those experiences in order to be close to God, you will never witness the depths God had to go to save us. There, in the depths...on the cross, that is where God's glory is ultimately revealed and it is the only mountaintop we really need.

Amen.