

## TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

March 3, 2019

Text: Luke 9:28-43

Theme: The Holy One

In these days leading up to Ash Wednesday, I decided to complete a spiritual exercise that included recalling any mountaintop experiences I had over the past twelve months. So what constitutes a mountaintop experience? It is when we come away from a situation with a sense that we have been in the real presence of the Holy One. It gives the person an overabundance of joy and peace that overshadows the more ordinary human experiences. It is when the glory of God is revealed.

Over the span of a lifetime it is so much easier to name these spiritual highs. We will experience one next Sunday afternoon when Deacon Erin is ordained to *Word and Sacrament* ministry. I promise you that we will be in the presence of God as the Holy Spirit swirls around us. I remember my own ordination rite as if it was yesterday but since it took place over twenty-three years ago I could not include it in my current list. The challenge of the exercise is to restrict the mountaintop experiences to recent memory. It calls for a deeper contemplation and thought about where we see God at work in the here-and-now.

Please indulge me this morning as I share with you some of the things on my list. It is my hope that it will encourage you to take some time to consider a list of your own before you return on Wednesday.

By far my trip to Israel ranks as my number one spiritual high. It was pure joy to travel with my two daughters on this journey to the Holy Land. Around the Sea of Galilee I could imagine Jesus walking with his disciples to the various towns and villages. In the serenity of the Mount of Olives I stood and looked towards the city of Jerusalem and imagined what it was like for Jesus to anticipate his final days. And in the streets of the city (when the crowds of people were pressing against us in the marketplace) it was not difficult to recreate the walk that Jesus took as he carried his own cross before his crucifixion.

In sharp contrast to the Holy Land my second spiritual high took place in Houston, Texas, where I spent a week with our youth for the ELCA Youth Gathering.

Awesome worship services were complemented with motivational speakers who spoke freely about their faith and their love for Christ. It is difficult to put into words what it is like to be in the presence of 32,442 young people who for five days became the body of Christ in a sea of bright orange T-Shirts. God not only revealed himself in the mass gatherings but blessed our smaller group of fourteen as new relationships were built around shared meals.

And then there was the vacation I took with my family to Huntington Beach, California. It is the ocean that helps me remember the vast expanse of God's creation and the extent of his love. Waking up to the sound of the waves was a gentle reminder to start the day with prayers of thanksgiving for this time of rest and renewal. Listening to the sound of the waves in the evening was another gentle reminder to end the day in prayer for an awesome day with my family.

Once all the obvious experiences were named, I had to dig deeper to discover the other times when I encountered the living God. It should not come as a surprise that in rapid succession I could name what took place here in our worship. On Christmas Eve our church was overflowing with people as God introduced us to his Son in human form at the time of his birth. On Easter our church was overflowing again as God made good on his promise to break the chains of sin and death.

And it was this past year that we dedicated the stained glass windows to the glory of God. It was this past year that we hosted the Jewish community as they used our church facility for worship on their high holy days. And it was this past year that over 2,000 people streamed to the temple in McLean to remember those who died at the *Tree of Life* synagogue in Pittsburgh. Not a single person there could deny the joy that overshadowed the pain that brought us together.

Over time we learn that these mountaintop moments are essential to our moving forward in faith. Each encounter with God is a real and powerful way for us to face the future. It gives us the courage to face the challenges of life. Imagine what it was like for Peter, James and John to (all of a sudden) be awakened from sleep to find Jesus looking different. His face had somehow changed and he was now wearing dazzling white clothes. The real presence of God was seen as Elijah and Moses stood with him to have this intimate conversation about his departure and what he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.

And when it was all over we share with Peter the reflection that it was good for them to be there ... it is good for us to have these encounters with God. And what is so wonderful about our lesson for this morning is that God revealed himself in the magnificent glory at the top of a mountain and then again as Christ came down from that mountain and ministered to the people. What we experience in these spiritual highs prepares us for the valleys.

It confirms for us that our mountaintop experiences (no matter where they take place or with whom they happen) all need to point to Jesus Christ. Christ in all of his dazzling clothes gives us a glimpse into who he is and (when all of that disappears) Christ gives us a glimpse into who we are in relationship to him as he touches us with his healing presence back on the ground and back on familiar territory.

On Transfiguration Sunday we are invited into a deeper engagement with our faith. Our lesson invites us to not only experience what happened to the disciples but also to go and experience it for ourselves. God gives us these mountaintop experiences so we have direction. God gives us these moments so we have a broader view in which to experience the fullness of the Holy One. But we also need to come down from the mountain into the valleys. Valleys are places where we also experience God. The inspiration, faith, grace and hope we see in those God-given moments is what will sustain our witness in the midst of injustice, brokenness, and pain.

I took the extra step in the spiritual exercise to include those times and places where I saw the real presence of the Holy One once back in the valley. Please indulge me this morning as I share with you some of the things on my list. It is my hope that it will encourage you to take some time to consider a list of your own before you return on Ash Wednesday.

I thought about John Baker who was only with us a few short months before he died. He taught me what it looks like to be spiritually hungry. By now everyone knows of my love to do home visits with those who cannot come to worship. It is with them that I sit in a holy silence after communion. It was gathering with a small group of people for the funeral of Tom Bates that let me see the love he shared with his wife that was ever so evident.

And just this week I had the honor to sit on the edge of the bed with Linda just a few hours before she died.

It is time for us to identify for ourselves the times and places we have been in the real presence of God so that we have the strength to stand with Jesus as he heads to Jerusalem. I believe the more encounters we can name the better prepared we will be for what will soon follow. In both the mountains and the valleys we catch a fuller glimpse of the Holy One. Amen