

THE GEOGRAPHY OF GOSPEL: The Mountain

Luke 9:28-36

Geography, as is the case with gospel, affects those who explore it, all who live within it. Though we may plan and struggle to overcome the effects of geography, it almost always succeeds in confounding our efforts. Perhaps it is healthy that we continue to be humbled by creation; perhaps such humility better prepares us for the good news of God's love and grace, mercy and justice, compassion and peace.

On this last Sunday before Lent, we approach the experience of mountain. Most people who occupy a particular geography find it difficult to imagine another. Some years ago, a couple from Minnesota arrived in Southern California as tourists. As we might expect, they were excited about visiting Disneyland but they were most surprised about the mountains that are present in Los Angeles, both around and within. For Minnesotans who count the highest peak in the state to be only a third of the height of Mount Wilson, the mountains around us were spectacular. Imagine had they traveled the Sierra Nevadas and climbed Mount Whitney.

Mountains have always been significant not only in geography but also in gospel. We hear of a particular peak in the account of the transfiguration found in three of the four gospels. Traditionally, we identify Mount Tabor as the place where a few of the disciples experienced a change in Jesus as well as visions of the prophets Moses and Elijah. This mountain pokes up in the valley that divides Israel from north to south; it is visible from some distance even as it provides a great view of surrounding territory from its height.

Views are a least one aspect of mountains. Often weather changes as one climbs up a mountain and winds are likely to be fiercer. Breathing may be more difficult in as oxygen levels fall and the effects of sun may be more intense. A mountaintop is easier to defend than a broad valley and thus fortresses, such as Masada, were built on or near peaks. Jerusalem is located mostly on a mountaintop, protected on two sides by deep ravines and the other by slopes that were not always easily conquered; little wonder that it took the heroic King David to conquer the city and make it the capital of his nation. Israel, out of its history, suspected that God could be best contacted on a mountain.

Jesus and three of his disciples are on the mountaintop when matters begin to be fantastic. Jesus suddenly takes on a bright, even glorious appearance and then two others who are thought to be Moses and Elijah also seem to be present. There is a suggestion that the weariness of the disciples may have provoked such conclusions. Perhaps hoping that the three would remain, Peter suggests a familiar response: set up booths to shelter each of them from any threat that might occur there on the mountaintop. . It is a voice commanding them to listen to this Jesus who is a beloved son that causes them to consider otherwise.

There are experiences that may cause us to react quickly, often as a result of rising fear. The disciples may have wished to show themselves to be hospitable to the three that seemed to occupy the mountaintop with them. The voice, apparently from heaven, halts their first impulses to be set aside. They will be invited to travel down from the mountain, far away from all the glory they have seen and felt and become the gospel to all the people. Impulsive behavior will overtake faithful consideration, particularly at the cross but it will be those moments when they are able to open themselves to the Spirit of God that will become the lessons of gospel.

We, too, are called to move beyond quick reactions based upon fear to responses of faith. It may mean that we will have to step back from the immediate activity in order to gain a better

sense of all the resources---especially blessings---that are made available to us by the God who wishes to equip faithful people with knowledge and truth needed to act. Those whom we may name “first responders” in our world, depend upon training that keeps them focused upon the task before them, usually without much thought to the possible consequences of courageous activity.

As followers of Christ, Wesleyan people, we are in the midst of a period of tumult. The vote of General Conference, as expected, has raised anxieties, particularly among those who count themselves aligned with the minority. It appears that our church wishes to maintain its stance regarding a part of the world’s population, to continue current rules excluding part of this congregation, some of our friends, members of our family, as well as some who sense they are called to ordination. Many who count all to be children of God are confused and even offended by such pronouncements and already consider leaving the United Methodist Church and this congregation.

Our bishop, Dr. Grant Hagiya has responded with these words: “Now that the General Conference Special Called Session is over, it is time that we focus on what God is calling us to: Our mission and ministry in the very name of Jesus Christ! Nothing is more important than this. Nothing must distract us from this central purpose. Nothing must stand in the way of our ministries of compassion and care!

“What I am calling us to do is to learn what God is trying to teach us through this Special Called Session and get to the business of being the church. We need to focus on making disciples of Jesus Christ. We need to engage our local neighborhoods and surrounding communities. We need to feed the hungry, house the immigrant, heal the sick, and preach the Good News.

“It is important for us to confess our sins and shortcomings: Too many have been hurt and harmed in our theological wars. Too many have been hurt and harmed by being objectified by the church. Too many have left the church because they have not been welcomed or cared for. If there has been anything I have done personally that has offended or harmed, intentionally or unintentionally, I ask for your forgiveness. I pray that we will all seek such confession and forgiveness.

Most of all, we must turn to each other for healing and care. It is time to put our arms around each other and heal from harming each other. It is time for us to have hearts of peace and not hearts of war. It is time for us to support each other and care for each other.”

We will be better served as a church and as individuals to move beyond fearful reactions to faithful responses. Though the vote has been taken, the Judicial Council will review the plan to determine whether or not each part is constitutional. This council will meet in April. The leadership team of the Western Jurisdiction which includes both laity and clergy from every conference in the West will meet in less than two weeks, possibly to create options for congregations and members. Implementation of the majority plan will require time, surely years. All this may suggest that reaction serves only to intensify and extend harm and hurt.

Let us remember another experience of mountain. Greatly angered by Jesus’ statement of the gift of God’s grace for all people including the widow and the alien, beyond those who counted themselves God’s chosen, the community rushed to throw Jesus off a mountain cliff. But Jesus merely walked through the crowd and went on his way, his way to be gospel in all matters, for all people. Will we have the courage to follow him, confident that God is always with us? Thanks be to God. Amen.