

“Mountaintop Moments”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Transfiguration Sunday – February 15, 2015

**Mark 9: 2-9**

How many of you have climbed a mountain before? It doesn't have to be a big mountain, like Mount McKinley or Pike's Peak. Just any hill which gets you to the top of an overlook. What is required to climb a mountain? (ask for their responses) Good shoes or boots; proper clothing; water and food; you need to be in good shape; some might say you need to be a little crazy, especially if you're climbing a really high mountain!

What is your reward when you climb a mountain? (again, ask for their responses) It might be the beautiful views from the great height you are at. It might be the sense of accomplishment you feel in achieving that goal. It might be the joy and pride you share with others you are with in reaching that point.

Mountaintops have always been special locations throughout my lifetime. Some of my earliest childhood memories of mountains are with my family spending a week each winter in Vermont snow skiing with extended family and friends. Taking the long chairlift ride up to the top of the mountain at Killington Ski Area made me feel as if I had gone to the top of the world. And then, there is the thrill of coming back down that mountain with the help of gravity, and I'll admit as a youngster sometimes going faster than I should have gone.

I remember as a youth climbing Lookout Mountain at Montreat Conference Center in North Carolina with fellow youth and adults from my home church in West Virginia. It was not only a physical adventure but a spiritual experience, as well. I was a young person wondering what lay ahead of me in a life of adulthood. To gaze out over the Appalachian Mountains with fellow friends and adult mentors around me, we didn't have to say it, but we knew God was present in that holy moment of fellowship.

I have been blessed to have stood in some of the most beautiful mountain ranges of this world: from the Swiss and French Alps, to the Rocky Mountains, to the Lake Country in England, to the Highlands in Scotland, and to the mountains of Hawaii. One of the most breathtaking vistas I remember was climbing the Diamondhead Volcanic Crater in Honolulu with Debbie. It was a true challenge to hike up, especially in the heat and sun of that late-spring day. But the views at the top were absolutely stunning, and they reminded me of God's incredible power in forming this earth in which we are privileged to call our home.

God spends a lot of time meeting his children on mountaintops. He calls Moses up to Mount Sinai, tells him to take off his sandals, and at that point Moses enters into God's presence. God shows Moses the Promised Land from Mount Nebo, even though Moses will not enter that land himself. Elijah hears God's still, small voice on a mountaintop – often described as “sheer silence.”

And then there are Jesus' mountaintop moments, most notably his transfiguration as described in today's scripture lesson. This story appears at the midway point of Mark's Gospel, signifying the crucial role this event plays in Jesus'

life. Remember, Mark does not begin his story of Jesus with his birth; instead, it begins with his baptism by John in the Jordan. So, this mountaintop moment lies halfway between the christening of Jesus' earthly ministry and the culmination of that ministry with his death and resurrection. It is a moment shrouded in mystery, causing uncertainty for those witnessing it. And yet, it offers an important reminder that the life of the Christian is not solely spent at the pinnacles of spirituality. For we are called to come back down the mountain to serve, to love, and to be witnesses to the one to whom we have been charged to listen to.

It's important to realize that we have skipped ahead quite a bit from the stories of the last few weeks in Mark. What has transpired from the first chapter to this point in the ninth chapter includes Jesus' teachings on life and death. This includes his proclamation, in chapter eight, "that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (8:31). Peter, who had just before this professed that Jesus was the Messiah (8:29), cannot believe his master must die. Jesus rebukes him - "Get behind me, Satan!" - and tells his disciples and the crowds that discipleship is not about human wants but about divine needs. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35).

Jesus is calling on his followers - and us - to let go of the lives they had clung to, and embrace a new way of living, a life that is centered on him, on God, and on sacrifice for the sake of the good news. In order to embrace this new life, we have to let go of what weighs us down, so we might be freed for a new way of living in Christ.

Nanette Sawyer writes: The transfiguration of Jesus happens six days after these teachings, with Peter, James, and John as witnesses. They are terrified and confused when they see Moses, Elijah, and Jesus together. Peter, who recently questioned Jesus about the necessity of dying and rising, resists the fluid and transformational nature of the mountaintop experience by trying to nail it down. Let's build shrines, he says. He doesn't know how to respond to a mystical mountaintop experience, and he's afraid, right along with James and John. Not understanding what's happening, Peter tries to create containers for the experience, placing the holy men each in their own tabernacle: organized, separated, preserved.

But after this moment of illumination and glistening clothing, terror strikes the disciples, and they pass into the shadows. A cloud overshadows them. And in this cloud of unknowing, they are finally able to hear God - this moment in the shadows changes everything. Suddenly, looking around, they see things differently. Mountaintop experiences, it would appear, are not all sunshine and light. Sometimes it's our entering into the shadows that transfigures us (Nanette Sawyer, *The Christian Century*, February 4, 2015: 18).

I believe it is human nature to identify God's presence with mountaintop moments. No, I'm not saying you have to be on a mountain to truly know God. What I mean is that as humans, we usually identify those spiritual peaks or pinnacles with a feeling that that is where God spoke to us most clearly or with the most impact. It could have been at a spiritual retreat or conference. It could have

been at a particular worship service, or even through a particular speaker or preacher. Whatever the place or occasion, we can tell ourselves that in order to draw closer to God on a consistent basis, we need to try and recreate those mountaintop moments. And so we build tabernacles that seek to enclose God according to our perceived needs. When we don't feel that that pinnacle is being repeated in the church's worship, education, or service, then we might go seeking, what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls in his book Life Together "a human ideal rather than the divine reality."

The life of discipleship, as Jesus describes, and as God reaffirms by telling us to listen to him, is one of both peaks and valleys. It is a life that includes moments of great clarity and purpose, and it is a life that includes moments of cloudiness and uncertainty. If we are to only classify God as speaking to the community or to us as individuals only in mountaintop moments, then we are limiting God's omnipotent nature, and missing how the Spirit might truly have something to say to us even in our fear and anxiety. Indeed, God spoke to the disciples witnessing Jesus' transfiguration not when Moses and Elijah were visible, but when a cloud overshadowed all of them.

What I have always taken from the transfiguration story, whether it was from Mark's Gospel or Matthew or Luke, is that Jesus and the disciples came down the mountain. They did not ultimately build tents, as Peter had suggested, and remain up on the mountain, waiting for everyone to come to them. No, they put one step in front of the other, even though they did not fully comprehend what had just happened, even though they did not totally grasp what Jesus had said or why he didn't want them to tell anyone about it (9:9). In each of their footsteps, they walked by faith, trusting that God would be there, through all that life would throw at them.

We have to come back down from the mountaintop moments of our faith, and faithfully walk into what awaits us. Those things which frighten us or make us uneasy – debates on theology or social issues; future health and mission of the church; personal direction with family, job, or school – whatever may be waiting for us at the bottom of the mountain. We can't avoid the valleys by denying they exist, or moving from place to place in a desire to please our own spiritual needs. Mountaintop experiences can be exhilarating. But there is something to be said for the consistency of a balanced daily life filled with remembrance of the holy . . . It is deep soul work that bring us through the places of shadow and the places of illumination, to settle in for the long journey of spiritual maturation (ibid).

On this Sunday before we begin our Lenten journey, may we never be mistaken about the voice which speaks from the cloud on top of that mountain: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to Him!" And may we listen to him at all times and places along our particular journey of faith.

Thanks be to God for His Beloved Son. Amen.