Mountaintop Experiences

Vienna Presbyterian Church
Glenda Simpkins Hoffman
Matthew 17:1-9

June 28, 2015
Many of us have probably had some kind of mountaintop experience—a time and place when we encountered the Lord in some mysterious way. It may have been while we were participating in a youth camp, spiritual retreat or mission trip, or maybe even during a normal day.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I remembered one of my first mountaintop experiences. It was the summer before junior year in college, and I was participating in a campus ministry summer project. We worked during the day, but our evenings and weekends were spent in Bible study, small groups, discipleship training, and outreach to the community. The whole summer was a mountaintop experience—a greenhouse environment for growth and transformation. It was a true blessing as I experienced the presence and power of God in a way that I never had before.

The following year, however, was a difficult one for me as I tried to integrate this spiritual high into the demands of my real life of school, work, and relationships. Only later did I realize both the mountaintop experience and the struggle of the next year were all part of God’s grace to prepare me for what was to come the next summer when my older brother died suddenly. It was the most difficult experience of my life. But what was amazing was the way I experienced the reality of Jesus’ presence, peace, and power in the midst of such grief.

Our passage for the day is an account of a mountaintop experience. But it is more than that. The Transfiguration is a unique and supernatural event. Each of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—give an account of this event. And it’s important to understand the context of what has just happened previously. Jesus asked his disciples who they believed him to be, and Peter jumped in with his great confession, “You are the Messiah,” which is the right answer. But the problem is they didn’t quite understand what that meant yet. Jesus goes on to announce for the first time that he would suffer and die. Let’s just say, it didn’t go over so well. And if that wasn’t a hard enough saying, he goes on to say that those who follow him must deny themselves and take up their crosses daily.

There is a significant turn that is happening in Jesus’ life, teaching, and ministry. And it’s at this juncture that Jesus takes up Peter, James, and John—his closest disciples, his inner circle, the leaders among leaders—
for this unique mountaintop experience in which they witness Jesus’ transfiguration.

So what does the word transfiguration mean? It comes from the Greek word μεταμορφώ [metamorphoo /met·am·or·fo·o/] from which we get metamorphosis—to change into another form, to transform, to transfigure (like a caterpillar forms a chrysalis and then turns into a butterfly). Jesus’ physical appearance actually changes. He glows with glory as his face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. This radiance was attributed to Adam, Abraham, and Moses, whose face also shone when he came down from the mountain after encountering God.

In this unique, supernatural mountaintop experience, Jesus’ identity was revealed to those closest to him as his outward appearance became an expression of the inward reality of his deity and majesty. This is who he was and is before he took on human flesh and blood. And this is who he will be when he is raised and exalted in all of his glory.

In the devotional readings and our sermon series, A Summer with Jesus, we have read about Jesus’ power over nature, the physical realm of illness, the spiritual realm of demon possession, and even over death itself. The power of Jesus was manifested to make clear his identity as the only Son of God, who has the power to do what only God can do. But in his transfiguration, Jesus’ true identity—his deity and glory and majesty—is visibly apparent not only in what he does but in who he is.

But that’s not all. Not only is Jesus’ appearance transfigured, but two of the greatest Old Testament figures, Moses and Elijah, join Jesus on the mountain, representing the two main sections of the Old Testament—the law and the prophets.

But Moses and Elijah are important for other reasons as well. Both had visions of the glory of God on a mountain, both were initially rejected by the people but vindicated by God, both were advocates of the covenant, both worked miracles, and both were considered by first-century Judaism to be transcendent figures who did not die but were taken directly to heaven.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with Jesus indicates the greatness of Jesus, who transcends them both as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Their appearance makes clear Jesus’ continuity with what God has done in the past history of his
people and, at the same time, points to the future and Jesus’ own suffering and ultimate victory in the resurrection. In his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus will accomplish for us what we could never accomplish on our own.

Such an amazing occasion demands a response, and Peter has a plan. As usual he is the first to speak and steps forward once again as a leader and offers to build some kind of memorial to commemorate this event. You have to love his zeal and enthusiasm, but sometimes he just doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Peter is probably doing his best to get his mental and spiritual arms around what’s happening here. After all, this is not only their once-in-a-lifetime experience, it’s a once in *humankind* experience. Peter’s excited, so he starts to talk; he’s figured out a plan and he’s ready to do something. Perhaps his desire to build tents is a desire to camp out and hang on to this spiritual high. We don’t really know. He means well, but it becomes clear that this is not the right response.

The passage makes clear what the right response is: “While he (Peter) was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

The appearance of a cloud may seem odd to us, but this is why knowing God’s story is important because the transfiguration connects to the Old Testament story. The cloud represents the presence of God that filled the tabernacle with his Shekinah glory, led the people in the wilderness, and spoke the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. Now God reveals himself in a cloud to the three disciples who are present using the same words used at Jesus’ baptism. “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased.” But notice something else is added). “Listen to him!”

The disciples and we are to understand that Jesus is the presence of God. Jesus is the new tabernacle—the reality of God’s abiding presence with us. As John says, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John1:14-18). As the God-man, divine and human, Jesus has fulfilled the law and prophets, and opened the way to an eternal relationship with God.
When the disciples hear the voice, they do what any normal human would do in that situation—they fall to the ground overcome with fear. We may wonder why they are suddenly afraid, but I think this is a typical human reaction. However faithful we are, however much we try to love and serve Him, when God gets close, we get scared.

I was challenged by the words of one writer who said, “I think what we are actually scared of is not God, but ourselves. We cannot hide before God; we cannot pretend. There can be no face-saving evasions or little white lies. The little pretenses and masks and images that we construct to protect our self-image and our relationships with others are stripped away. God knows us intimately, completely, including all our faults and failings and weaknesses and contradictions and hypocrisies. To confront God, then, is to confront your own inadequacies and failings; to know that they are laid bare.” Who wouldn't find that a bit scary?

But it's not just the fear of being seen as we truly are that scares us; there's the knowledge that God calls us to become what we are called to be. The journey from who we are to who we could be is a frightening one, not least because we cannot know where it will lead us.

The Bible is filled with people who are overcome with fear because the glory and greatness of God puts into perspective who we really are. But did you notice how Jesus responds? He comes to them, touches them, and reassures them that they need not be afraid. And now they see no one but “Jesus himself alone.” Moses and Elijah are gone, but Jesus stays—Jesus alone is with them.

And this is what we need to understand. The way to move beyond fear is faith. Faith is a relationship of practical trust in Jesus, the with-us God. Faith means we look to Jesus alone in this interactive relationship with the Lord of the universe. I like the way one artist depicts this:

It is always about Jesus because Jesus is God with us. And he alone can show us the way to live by faith and give us the power to live by faith.
The words spoken about Jesus really help us to understand what this means. Like the disciples, we need to **listen to Jesus**. To hear or listen in the Old Testament sense carries the connotation of obeying—hearing what he says and doing it.

Like Peter, we need to stop talking, stop trying to figure things out, stop trying to do something in our own human effort. We need to stop, look, and listen to Jesus alone and what he wants to reveal. It was critically important that the disciples understand Jesus’ identity as the Son of God and his mission to suffer and die, and then be raised from the dead according to the scriptures. They could not follow him by denying themselves and taking up their crosses daily without living by faith and relying on his grace. To do that, they must stop talking, look to Jesus, and listen to what he wanted to reveal.

Last September, I had the great joy of traveling with some people from our church to Italy to see spectacular art and architecture that reflected God’s story. In The Basilica of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe, I had a mountain-top experience as I contemplated the Transfiguration of Jesus as depicted in the mosaic before me. The figures of Moses and Elijah loom large on either side, but Jesus is depicted symbolically by a cross with a small picture of his face in the center. The disciples are also depicted symbolically as sheep—the three with Jesus on the mountain above and the others depicted at the bottom of the mosaic. The figure in the middle is the saint after whom the basilica is named after.

While our group was in the basilica, I was overwhelmed with a sense of the presence of God, so I knew I needed to pay attention. So, while the rest of the group went next door to have lunch, I went back to the basilica, to **stop** and be present to Jesus and what his Spirit was stirring within me, to **look** at the mosaic, and to **listen** to what the Lord wanted to say to me.

In that moment, I was overwhelmed with the majesty of Jesus—his holiness, beauty, goodness. The cross and the images of the sheep helped me to understand even more deeply how much Jesus loves **me**—his precious lamb, and his desire for me to become more like him—more loving and compassionate—to feed his sheep and tend his lambs.

Mountaintop experiences are not experiences to hang on to so that we can continue to experience a spiritual high. I knew that wasn’t an option for me anyway because the bus would be pulling out shortly.
This encounter was timely for me. I was just coming off a three-month sabbatical—a great gift from this church of rest, renewal, and frankly restoration after a very depleting season in my life. I felt a little anxious about resuming the demands of ministry. So I knew in this mountaintop experience that the Lord was confirming invitations he had already given, showing me how to live with a greater sense of his love and a greater capacity to love others in the next season of my life. Invitations:

- To not try to do too much,
- To ruthlessly eliminate hurry from my life,
- To still my mind, and heart, and body, and soul to listen deeply to Jesus’ voice through scripture and prayer and silence and solitude and community,
- To be more present to Jesus and aware of his presence with me in all the other moments of my life—even the most messy and demanding.
- And to simply be more available to love others concretely.

I have not done this perfectly in the last year. In fact, I am probably more aware of how far I fall short. What I know is that I can’t do this on my own. I believe mountaintop experiences are given so that we can descend into our real, ordinary, everyday lives and live the reality of Jesus’ presence right here, right now—wherever we find ourselves. Oswald Chambers wrote, “The test of mountaintop experiences, of mysticism, of visions of God and of solitariness is when you are ‘in the soup’ of actual circumstances.”

I love Rafael’s painting because it reveals the glory of the Transfiguration, but it also depicts the messiness of life down below. When Jesus and these three disciples descend from the mountain, they encounter a desperate father, an epileptic boy, and the rest of Jesus’ disciples who are unable to do anything about this messy situation. Jesus intervenes and casts out a demon, healing the boy. When the disciples ask why they could not do what was needed, Jesus said, “Because of your little faith. For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Faith does not mean trying harder or doing more. Faith does not mean everything will go our way. Faith does not mean bad things won’t happen. Faith is not about what we pray, or how our pray, or whether are prayers are answered the way we want. Faith is living in an interactive relationship
with Jesus and depending on his supernatural resources of love, grace, wisdom, and power.

The recent events in Charleston show us how messy and ugly and painful life can really be. But the world has witnessed true faith in Jesus through the grieving family members who—in the face of hate and violence and death have responded with grace, love, and forgiveness. Human striving alone can never account for that kind of response in that kind of situation. It is faith in Jesus—who he is and deep reliance on his grace, love, wisdom, and power to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. You see, “With God nothing is impossible.”

Their witness of their faith in Jesus is a challenge and encouragement to me in my life. And this is what the transfiguration is all about: When you see the glory of God in Jesus and understand that he is the very presence of God with you—no matter what. You know “All things work together for good for those who love God….” “Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 8: 28, 39). When Jesus is with you, you can “live by faith and not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). “With God nothing is impossible,” because Jesus is Lord, and Jesus is always with us no matter what comes our way.