

Sermon for Transfiguration, Feb. 19, 2023

This is a great story in today's Gospel. One day as they're travelling, Jesus and the 12 disciples, heading home to Capernaum from Syria, they take a travel break and Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a nearby mountain with him. We don't know if he only asked the three of them or if he asked the others and they didn't want to climb a mountain on a rest day from travelling. Anyway, those three go with him and at the top of the mountain, Jesus suddenly starts shining like the sun. And the disciples rub their eyes and look again and there are Moses and Elijah there talking to him, Moses who gave the law and Elijah, the greatest prophet of Israel.

The disciples don't know what to do or say, but of course, that doesn't stop Peter from blurting out the first thing he thinks of. "Master, it's good for us to be here. We'll make nice little huts for the three of you, and stay up here with you." And then the bright cloud of God's presence suddenly comes over them, and they are terrified and they fall to the ground, cowering, and they hear God's voice say, "This is my beloved Son. I am well pleased with him. Listen to him."

And after a few moments, Jesus comes up and touches them on the shoulder and says, "Get up." And he is back to looking like normal and Moses and Elijah and the bright cloud are gone. But they remember this moment to the end of their days. We read St. Peter's letter today, written so many years later, recalling it. This moment of close contact with God changes them, changes something within them. But they don't talk about it with anyone else until after the resurrection, when it all starts to make more sense.

We also heard the story of Moses' mountaintop experience today. His first mountaintop experience, because he had others. He has just succeeded in getting the children of Israel to Mt. Sinai in the wilderness, and he has assembled the people and made them purify themselves and God has descended on the Mt. Sinai in a bright cloud and given them the law. And the elders of the people come to Moses and say, "Don't let that happen again! You go talk to God and come back and tell us what he says and we'll do it, but don't let God appear to us again, or we'll die." They're terrified. And it's just after this that Moses goes up on the mountain, with his servant Joshua, though Joshua doesn't go all the way, and Moses goes into the cloud, and God gives him the tablets on which he's written the 10 commandments and tells him how to make the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant and all that. And he stays for 40 days.

We didn't hear about Elijah's mountaintop experience. It's in 1 Kings 19 if you want to read about it. He has just defeated the priests of Baal, and Israel has killed most of them and Queen Jezebel, a Baal worshipper, has vowed to kill him and he flees to the wilderness, all the way to Mt. Sinai, where he holes up in a cave. And God asks him what he's doing there, and he says he's running away from Jezebel before she kills him, the last prophet. And God says he's going to pass by. And Elijah hears a mighty wind, but God is not in the wind. And he hears and feels an earthquake, but God is not in the earthquake. And then fire sweeps by, but God is not in the fire. And then he hears a sound of sheer silence, and he knows God is in the silence, and he goes out and stands at the mouth of the cave.

Have any of you ever climbed a mountain? I grew up in BC so we often climbed mountains. One Saturday we took the ferry over to Washington and climbed Hurricane Ridge. You could see for miles and miles in all directions. The air was clear and fresh, like it'd never been breathed before. It was so quiet. It was easy to feel close to God and to nature. And it felt like we were miles above all of life's problems. Set apart. And I didn't want to leave.

We in the church often talk about spiritual experiences of God as mountaintop experiences, because it feels kind of like that. Like a time and place apart from the regular humdrum of daily living. Everything seems clearer and fresher and you can see for miles, you have vision of what is true and real and important in life. And at the same time, it can be frightening. We are not used to living at such heights. We are not used to experiencing God in such a close and intimate way. God's pretty high voltage, so much more than we are in every way. We feel that God can see right through us, which is scary, but also we can feel that immeasurable love surrounding us. It's an amazing feeling and we want to stay there, but it's also a lot to take in.

Have you ever experienced this? It's usually by surprise, when you're not really expecting it. An overwhelming sense of God's presence. Often this comes in flashes when we're out in nature. Often during worship. Or other times, like when a baby is born, or when someone dies. Or just randomly sometime. Because these experiences are always a gift of God. We want them to linger, but they don't. We want to repeat them, but we can't. I remember going to some evening worship event in my teens and I did feel God's amazing presence, and I was so uplifted and filled with joy and bliss – which lasted most of the next day! That I tried to repeat it the following week. I went back. Nothing at all. We can't control these experiences and we shouldn't chase them. They are by God's grace alone.

And not everyone experiences this. Jesus took three disciples with him. The rest stayed at the foot of the mountain. Moses took only Joshua. He didn't even take Aaron the priest his brother with him. Elijah went alone. Of course, not everyone wants to experience these things. The children of Israel were very happy for Moses to go up and leave them behind. And for all we know, the rest of Jesus' disciples might not have been into it either. And probably not everyone needs to experience God's presence that way either. Some people are already aware of God's presence all the time.

Here's another thing about all three of these stories. Each of these people was being prepared for something, something big. Luke is clear that Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about his upcoming journey to Jerusalem where he would be crucified, and they were strengthening him for that. And of course, Peter and James and John became leaders of the church after Pentecost and they probably needed all the help they could get. And even before that, as soon as Jesus gets to the bottom of the mountain, he's called upon to heal a man's son of epilepsy, so he's right back to work.

Moses was being prepared for the unenviable task of leading God's people through the wilderness and teaching them and forming them into the people of God. And in fact, after he spends 40 days on the mountain, being taught by God, God tells him he'd better get

down because the children of Israel are running amok with a golden calf, led by Aaron. So he had work to do the minute he got down.

And when God asks Elijah again, from the depth of the sheer silence, what he's doing there, and Elijah says kind of like it's rehearsed, that he's running away from Jezebel who's trying to kill him, God says he has a job for him and sends him back, into that danger, to anoint a new king for Israel to replace Jezebel's husband Ahab and a new prophet to take over from him, and he goes back and does that.

You see, the mountaintop experiences of our lives are there to prepare us for the work God sets before us. And that work is done on the plain below. It is in our humdrum daily existence that we carry out our work for God, live out our calling. It is in the give and take of regular life that we are called to spread the good news of God's love for us. That's where it's needed.

Think about it. If Jesus and the three disciples had camped out on the mountain, nothing would have happened. The bright cloud was gone and wasn't coming back. There was nothing much to do up there and sooner or later they'd get hungry. If Moses had stayed up with God on Mt. Sinai, that would have been the end of the story because the Israelites would have wandered off with their golden calf and probably wouldn't have been heard of any more. If Elijah had stayed up there in the amazing silence, Israel would have been stuck with the bad King Ahab and there would have been no prophet to take his place. We can't do much good in the world stuck up there on the heights. This may be the origin of the saying, "So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good."

It is here in the hurly burly of regular life that our calling, and everyone's calling, is lived out. It's a lot harder here, too. Up on the mountain, there's no one bugging you. Nothing much to do except pick berries to eat and think about God. Down here in normal life you have to deal with annoying people, actually do work, pay bills, all that stuff that distracts our minds from God.

And yet, it's here that the work is needed. Here that the vision of God's kingdom, so clear on the mountaintop, needs to be shared with people and lived out. God rarely gives us these experiences solely for our own benefit. God gives them to us so we can share them with others. So we can be transformed enough to do God's work in the world.

Because once we've experienced the mountaintop, it changes us and we don't forget. Peter wrote about this years and years later. It changed him and he was better for it. When we have those short glimpses of God, which is really all we can take, they change us and we start to become more like Jesus, shinier, as he was shiny. We start to love God better and then, of course, we start to love our neighbours better.

As Christians, we sometimes experience that mountaintop but we're not called to linger there, pleasant as that would be. I give thanks for times I've had mountaintop experiences, but I also give thanks that I've discovered God is just as present in my day-to-day existence and in the people around me. We are called to take our faith into our real, ordinary lives, and shine Jesus' light here and now, where we are, each day. And we do this

most simply by loving one another, being kind to one another, encouraging one another.
May each of us shine with the Spirit of Jesus and bring light and love to all those around us.