

SERMON
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Mountains and Valleys (Transfiguration Sunday)

February 26, 2017

Mathew 17 1-9 Exodus 24: 12-18 2Peter 1: 16-21

I don't know if any of you have had the experience of climbing to the top of a mountain, or maybe just a hill and looking out at everything below. There is something about the sight that just touches you. A sense of awe.

As a child, one of my favourite local places to go with my family was a place called Newlands Corner. It's a popular picnic site and beauty spot on a ridge of the North Downs in SW England. Now it certainly isn't a mountain, in fact it's only about 600 feet high, but it has some of the best views of the Surrey Hills. And for me, it was always a place to go to just feel God's presence. And I wasn't the only one that felt that. Shortly after my Mom passed away and I was spending a few days with my Dad, I asked him if he wanted to go anywhere. I wasn't surprised that he wanted to go to Newlands Corner. It was a good place to pray; a good place to feel God's presence.

And perhaps that is why Jesus heads up the mountain with Peter, James and John. He knew that it was a good place to pray; a place where he could experience God. I don't expect that the disciples were surprised by the decision to climb the mountain, since Jesus had often sought out quiet places for meditation. But what happened at the top of the mountain, left the disciples speechless. They saw Jesus totally transformed before their very eyes. Scripture tells us that he was *'transfigured.'* We are told in Matthew 17:2 -

"his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light"

And suddenly, with Jesus appeared Moses and Elijah – sitting there, talking with Jesus. I suspect that the disciples were in shock and disbelief. And I am certain that they undoubtedly had no name for the wonder that they experienced. But the

church calls this “the transfiguration” – and we celebrate this event in our church calendar. The transfiguration, meaning transformed. And that is exactly what happened to Jesus. But it wasn’t only Jesus that was transformed – the disciples were changed too. They experienced God at the top of that mountain; and they wanted to hold onto that experience for as long as they could. Peter said:

“It’s good to be up here” (Matt 17:4)

And he wanted to build three shelters. My guess is that he wanted to stay on that mountain top and prolong the moment for as long as possible.

Peter’s experience is one that many of us might share. The desire to hold on to our mountain top experiences is a longing deep within us. Think of the mountain as a metaphor for a time when you felt close to God. A “Good Time.” We all have a desire to return to the times we remember as “the good times”, and not just in our Christian lives. In our families, we may tell stories of our fondest childhood memories. We may return time and time again to a family cottage or favorite retreat, just as I did to Newlands Corner. We take photos during vacations in the hope of recapturing the sense of pleasure and the freedom of stress. There is a longing to hold on to the things that make us feel comfortable and peaceful. Like Peter, there is a longing to stay on the mountain.

In our busy, driven, organised-to-the-minute, modern world, drawing aside from stress is seen as being beneficial to our mental and emotional health. Advertisers promise us that aromatic bath oils and scented candles will create escapes like serene meadows and floral hillsides. Best selling CD’s offer recordings of water sounds, birdcalls, and wind chimes. We decorate our ‘quiet’ rooms in pastel colours to be restful and to induce calm in our spirits. You see, like Peter, when we enjoy a time of peace and quiet, it is often a time when God feels very close to us, and we want to try to hold onto that moment, to recapture it any way that we can.

And there is nothing wrong with that. It is good to stop and feel God's presence in our surroundings, the rivers, the gardens, the mountains. As generations of campers, sailors, hikers and explorers could attest, there's nothing quite like nature to make you contemplate God. In nature, God reaches out to you, touches you, speaks to you and transforms you. Even people who fancy themselves immune to such things, are moved by nature and its ability to elicit feelings of jaw-dropping awe. God transforms them at the top of the mountain. The new findings recently published in *Psychological Science*, suggest that "*awe-inspiring sights increase our motivation to make sense of the world around us*", and the article confirms that the awe-equals-religion equation is a very real and powerful experience. It is no surprise that *Time Magazine* wrote an article called "*Why There Are No Atheists at the Grand Canyon.*"

But we can't all walk up mountains, or trek down the Grand Canyon. We may have restraints of time, finances, and in my case, physical agility. But in our modern 21st century technology, we can do the next best thing. We can experience the mountain and the awe of God, right where we sit. Now my husband does not like flying, or being at heights, or on a mountain edge – so he will be very happy that he will not have to take a plane ride to a remote mountain. Instead, I will bring the mountain to you. We will do something a little different. As we watch a brief video of the Grand Canyon, I invite you to meditate on God; experience God's awe, and listen to what God is saying to you.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-rfd8KBUB0>

Maybe, like the disciples, you felt that God was with you as you meditated on the images of the mountains. Perhaps, like the disciples, you heard God speaking to you. Maybe, like Peter, the experience transformed you, and you wanted to stay in the moment.

But we cannot stay on the mountain top. All our great moments and experiences bring us back to everyday life. Mountaintops don't exist without the

valleys between them. Even Jesus knew that a return to the valley was imminent, and in verse 6, he told the disciples to “*Get Up.*” He knew that he was to return to the work that God had confirmed he was chosen for. The disciples knew that they must return to the valley too. God’s command to them was “*Listen to him.*” Listen and watch and learn.

In Luke’s Gospel we are told that as soon as they came down from the mountain, a large crowd surrounded Jesus. At once the demands on his life returned as people begged him:

“Heal my child,” “Cure my illness,” “Give me hope.”

Jesus came down from the mountaintop vision into the valley of reality.

We live our lives mostly in the valley of everyday work and worry. It is tempting to want to stay up the mountain – especially since it may take so much effort to get there. But, like Jesus and his followers, we know that we must come down from the mountain and continue to live our lives as Christians. But also, just as Jesus did, we need to make a place in our busy lives for moments of peace and prayer. We need to draw aside and listen to God’s call in our lives. We have to make the time for our own mountaintop moments – moments of prayer, meditation, reflection and study.

As you head out to your homes, places of work and busy lives this week, find your quiet space in the valley; find a time and place where you can be changed by the peace of being in the presence of the Holy One.

Amen