

February 23, 2020

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Mountaintop experiences. Some of us have likely had a experience we can call a mountaintop experience; some of us maybe not. Either way, when we hear about a mountaintop experience we generally know that whatever took place was extraordinary, out of the normal day to day of life experiences. It may even have been a life-changing experience. It is a remembered experience.

And some of those life changing experiences are dramatic, resulting in moving in an entirely different direction when we have descended the mountain. Other experiences may not be that life changing but will be remembered with fondness forever.

Often a mountaintop experience may have to do with the quietness of the location and the magnificent beauty that we find as we look out from a particular viewpoint. Sometimes the breathtaking vistas take our breath away and become embedded in our mind in such a way that we can consciously recall it at will.

Our first lesson and our gospel texts take us up on mountaintops today. Moses travels up Mt. Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights. On the seventh day he is given the tablets with the 10 Commandments. Why he stays up there 33 more days, I don't know. But we know that when he came down from the mountain God's people were worshipping a golden calf. And Moses must then call them back to God the creator who has now given them The 10 Commandments, which are truly basic rules and regulations for living together in community.

In our gospel text today, Peter grasps at a spectacular vision, and he is desperate to capture the spirit of the moment and he is reluctant to return to the "ho-hum" of everyday existence. He has witnessed something sublime and he wants to capture this experience. Who among wouldn't want to do just that?

He would like this episode to somehow make a difference in his life and the lives of his friends. He wants this experience on the mountaintop to shift the axis of power and rearrange the cosmos. He sees grandeur everywhere.

It is likely he is thinking that this experience will ignite the revolution he has dreamed about as he followed Jesus and heard how life can be so much more when we focus on God and his love for us. But Peter needs to preserve this visitation. We can imagine him thinking that this moment will change history. If only he can somehow capture it and preserve it.

We know the details: There on the mountain, with Moses and Elijah at his side, the earthly Jesus is transfigured with divine splendor. Peter is absolutely astonished. He rambles on and on about tents to house the majesty of it all – tents for the presence of God, reminiscent of the tabernacle of old. Peter so wants to hold, to contain, this spectacular presence. He comes up with a plan for how this meaningful event may stretch into somehow becoming permanent.

And in many ways you and I are like Peter. That is, we are desperate for an enduring transfiguration. We are desperate for God's presence to rest upon us, upon our lives and our neighborhoods, our town or city and indeed our world. We yearn for a permanent transformation of society, the liberation of the world from the reign of sin.

We want nothing less than the transfiguration of all things with the eternal goodness of God's life, starting with us, in our hearts and our lives, as we live in the power of God and prepare to spread this transformation to the world.

"Lord, it is good for us to be here," Peter says to Jesus, "I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

And then Peter learns what turns out to be a harsh lesson from Jesus. He learns that he controls nothing when it comes to God. Period. The theologian Karl Barth said, "It vanished as quickly as it had come...Jesus is seen alone, and no longer transfigured before them."

So Peter follows Jesus down the mountain, a return to the everydayness of life they all knew too well – the day by day of discipleship, of love for neighbors and strangers, and of confrontation with the authorities which will lead them to yet another hill we know as Golgotha, the hill of crucifixion.

The reality for Peter and for us is that transfiguration is not a heavenly escape from this earthly life. The mountaintop experience is not a call to travel to an elsewhere, a vantage point from which to diagnose what's wrong with this life. It is not a site from which we propose remedies for our communities. This transfiguration story turns the disciples back to the place they already know, back to that which is familiar.

God's presence transfigures this life of ours. Ordinary revelations are all around us, here, there and everywhere. Our whole world is held in God's hands. We are given gifts not simply to possess or own them; rather they are gifts that offer an abundance of unpredictable grace.

Transfiguration is an invitation to each of us to return to our communities and our lives with renewed attention and patience, waiting for the everyday and the mundane to take on a holy aura.

Transfiguration is an invitation to attend to the present and wonder at the ordinary; to let this life astonish us with the sacred. It is good for us to be here – right here – right now - right where we are, for this too is holy ground.

If we've had what we can call a mountaintop experience we too came down from the mountain and joined the mundane life we live day-to-day. There was likely a let-down, a nagging thought that if we could have stayed and captured that moment longer our lives would be better for it. Maybe, maybe not.

But we live in a world where we can access those very meaningful experiences whenever we like, in our minds or in photos. We can recreate that experience and enjoy it again and again and we might return to that mountain trying our best to recapture that moment in time.

But come down we do. So, let us take the attitude daily that God's presence is among us in so many and varied ways. Let us look for God's presence, his love, his compassion, his pointing us to what we might do in his name and for his sake.

And may God continue to shine his incredible light on us as we continue to look to him for all we need today and tomorrow. May we always and forever believe that we continually stand on holy ground.

Thanks be to God. Amen