

Back on the Mountaintop

February 14, 2010
Luke 9: 28-36

Pastor Heather Miner

Some scenes we revisit again and again in our faith life. The Christmas scene is one of them, a fun assemblage of scriptures painting a picture of a miraculous birth. Easter descriptions of the empty tomb tell Christ is risen. Pentecost, the sweeping down of the Holy Spirit, speaks of what gives us power for today. Each scene marks a season of church life.

The scene that prepares us for Lent, the introspective Christian time of journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem, is Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain top.

At our church I have been blessed to preach on this scene before; it seems fitting that our own mountains might influence that. Maybe it too is of God that I be reminded of Jesus, sitting still on a mountaintop and praying, in a season where I often spend too much time working. Is there no more calming image, than the one of Jesus at prayer? If we imagine it fully, our heartbeats slow down, our breathing grows deeper. We sit with him. The sunlight warms our skin. We relax. We drift off. Near to Jesus, we rest deeply in the love of the one who knows.

On this day, the day of transfiguration, we glance over at him and we see his face changing; his clothes becoming a dazzling white. How strong is God in this one! We soak in his strength.

This soaking in of Jesus' faith, the basking in God's love, begins the scripture. I can understand why we see the disciples come close to sleep, for it is easy to fall asleep when you are near one you love, one who will watch over you, protect you, love you. Prayer can lead to sleep. You know it can, don't you? Sometimes the best rest we get comes when we begin with prayer.

But before I start my new website "nappingforJesus.org," I should note that scripture often opposes sleeping when we are with Jesus--because we'll miss something important. So, if you have become a little too comfortable in your pew, it is time to wake up.

Moses and Elijah have arrived. They are both prophets who have seen the mountain top before. Moses went up the mountain to get the tablets of stone with the law engraved upon them. Elijah went up a mountain to show Jahweh beats all other gods. Neither scene ends in peace. Moses is sent down the mountain by an angry God who has seen his people turn their prayers towards a golden calf. On Mount Carmel, when God shows himself to

have power over the rain (a power no false god could demonstrate) God through Elijah orders all who serve the false gods to be killed. And in so doing, Elijah puts a mark on his back. He will now be hunted by the Queen who seeks revenge on the one who killed her prophets.

Moses and Elijah belong to a select group, not one which I'm eager to join. Both Moses and Elijah know what it means to be gripped by the will of God. God changed Jesus' complexion and set him aglow before these two appeared on the scene. In my imagination, the glow around Jesus looks like a force field. Rightly so, for these two signify God means business--there is a battle to be fought. When Elijah and Moses arrive, they are not bruised or beaten or hunched over. They are not ghosts or mere memories. They appear in glory—they have the radiance we would associate with angels, with those who are part of God's realm. They are God's neon sign, "all will be well."

On the mountaintop, they speak with Jesus about his departure. It is Jesus' Exodus so clearly recognizable in the Greek. Jesus will "accomplish" this Exodus, this pulling people out of slavery, in Jerusalem. The presence of Elijah and Moses places the difficulty of what is to come within a larger story of God's plan. We remember what it took to free a people, the plagues, the whining, the disbelief, the golden calf, and on and on. We remember all it took to convince a people that God was the God of the universe, the drought, the compassionate care for a widow, the raising of a son from the dead, the battle on Mount Carmel. Once again all this signifies that God needs to make himself known...for in answer to Jesus' question of "Who do you say I am?" only one got it right, and even he wouldn't trust completely what it is God means Jesus to do.

God continually acts to free people that they may come to really know God. Throughout scripture God battles that we might hear the divine exclamation, "I am."

By why is belief so difficult that God has to use servants like Moses and Elijah and Jesus that we might believe that God is here?

A while back an article led me to think if it were easy to believe, if belief were like the knowledge that water is made up of two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom, if God was so plain to see then faith would not be a choice. It led me to ponder the question...Would God violate

free will by making himself so evident--or creating people completely programmed with belief? Or is disbelief as much of our innate character as is belief?

John Calvin, as usual, has an opinion. He believes we are born into Adam's sin. When Adam took the apple, we all, in a way, ate of the apple, the very one God forbade us to eat. It follows if, because of Adam, we are born to eat the apple God tells us not to eat, then to live a sinful life is to choose nothing but to simply remain in the bonds into which we were born. Distrust and disbelief is part of being born human. It is part of our "natural" state, not the whole of it. There's also a part of us who wants to be with God, something planted in our hearts. But for that part to grow, we who choose Christ, must share in Jesus' Exodus journey. It is a journey where our innate distrust battles to undercut the faith Jesus has in God and in us who will follow.

The prophets standing on the peaceful mountaintop attest that God cannot transport us from a state of distrust to Christ-like trust with a snap of the divine fingers. If we are to give credence to the Bible and to what we know of our lives, then it is clear that the Exodus journey which leads us to deeper faith most often leads through a wilderness, just as it did for Moses and Israel long ago.

Furthermore, as we journey, we often find we, like Elijah, need to kill off that which wants to block God's way with us...those things to which we've clung because they've acted like our savior. For that is the character of false gods to have us believe that we cannot do without them.

Now that it is getting heavy, you can see why the scripture describes Peter and his companions as being weighed down by sleep. They aren't necessarily resting in the loving presence of Jesus. Rather, as they feel what is coming, the task of faith seems so weighty; the journey so very long. It can feel that way for us too. Sometimes when there is a matter that is difficult to face, we sleep...a lot.

The disciples were weighed down by sleep, but they manage to stay partially awake. They see Jesus' glory, his appearance telling of the end of the journey even before it has begun.

Mountaintop prayer is good for that, you know. I think that's why we ascend the mountain each year right before Lent. The Lenten journey we take with Jesus towards Jerusalem can get heavy. Examining what it is that keeps us from being fully free to live with God, thinking about how we might kill it off, can be heartrending. There will be struggle as our unfaithfulness wrestles with our desire to more fully enter into the life of Christ. So here on the mountaintop we are granted a vision that all will be well,

that even Jesus who went through the worst, came out "in glory." With his heavenly glow set in our mind, perhaps we too can believe we will make it through and thus be willing to enter again into the ashes this Wednesday. Enter in knowing, if we are faithful, at the end of these 40 days life will feel more like heaven than the "dust to dust" of our lesser nature.

Part of me can't wait to shout out Easter Hallelujahs!

Oh God, can't we skip the tears of the journey and just get busy living within the mountaintop experience?!

Let's get up and build those dwellings on top of the mountain, shall we? Let's try to keep Elijah and Moses and Jesus on top of the mountain where we can come, as a tourist, to get some of that God stuff. I can see the vendors below selling miniature glowing action figures, t-shirts with "The Big Three Experience." Let's invest nothing but a little time to satisfy our curiosity and then move on to the next attraction and then to the next and the next...giving nothing of ourselves, taking little of what's really offered.

That is the way of we who are only half awake. Peter, catching a glimpse of the retreating Elijah and Moses, jumps up ready for action, except, as scripture says, "He didn't know what he was saying."

Wake up!

This is not a bus tour where we can simply get out, look at a few things, and then return to our seats ready to be driven to the next place on someone else's itinerary. We need to be aware of what "not of God" influencers are part of our lives so we aren't jumping up and doing that thing which would keep us from God's truer purpose.

Every year, Lent is an opportunity for God to reveal those voices that turn you from the everlasting God. Lent is a chance to get off that bus and choose instead to walk with Christ, in his trust filled obedience with the one who wants no less for each of us that we too might come to know God by the uniquely New Testament Abba.

"It is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings..." Peter suggests. He might have gone on except God, too, is on the mountain. God needs Peter. God needs James and John. God needs us. God needs us to hear properly if Jesus' Exodus is to wake up a sleeping people.

So the cloud of God moves until it encompasses the disciples. Peter is silent. This is a once-in-the-gospel encounter.

God will not be heard in this manner again.

The manner of the deep voice from the sky...."Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son,

my Chosen; listen to him.”

If we wish to hear God’s voice, we won’t listen for the deep voice--we will listen to Jesus. If we are going to hear well Jesus’ voice, we will accompany him down the mountain, travel with him to Jerusalem, hear his cry from the cross to forgive us all, and hear him speak to us on the road to Emmaeus. We will listen deeply. We will let his words give form to our faith, increase our trust, help us to hear God’s desire for us in prayer.

Our listening begins today while we are on the mountain. The disciples went to the mountaintop, not because it had the double black diamond slope, but because Jesus invited them to come with him. They went to be with Jesus. The view is good and brings new understanding, but they went because they loved Jesus. Every year, we come to the mountaintop before the Lenten journey just to be with Jesus. We come because somewhere in our lives we heard the invitation. Somewhere we came across this man who radiates that for which we long: his compassion for all people, his healing, his challenge to his disciples and thus to us, his connectedness to the grand creator God, the one he calls Abba.

So sit awhile. Enjoy the sunshine of this day. Find a spot where you can imagine the mountaintop. Allow yourself to simply be with Jesus. Soak in his love. Feel his joy in having you near. And stay awake. Jesus likes being with his friends.

Luke 9: 28 - 36

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” - not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. NRSV