

Mountain Top Experiences – Valley Reality Checks
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Transfiguration Sunday

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 34:29-35

²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

Gospel Lesson: Luke 9:28-43

²⁸ Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹ And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰ Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹ They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵ Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" ³⁶ 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.

³⁷ On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. ³⁸ Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child." ³⁹ Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. ⁴⁰ I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." ⁴¹ Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." ⁴² While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground with convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. ⁴³ And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

The Sermon

If any of you has had the privilege of seeing in person – or in a vision – Jesus in his transfigured glory, I will gladly yield the pulpit at this time so we can all learn from and with your experience.

I don't say this lightly. There are definitely mystics in our midst, as there have been throughout the history of humanity, and we can learn much about the unseen world of the Spirit through their special gifts. We would not have much of the prophetic literature of the Bible if individuals – oft-times very reluctantly – had not been seized by God and granted dramatic images that they felt compelled to share at risk of the wrath rather than the continued communication from God.

Ecstatic visions, sometimes intentionally induced by hallucinogens, or by fasting, or exposure to extreme conditions, are means of spiritual insight across cultures. Unbidden, and uncontrollable, they can – of course – also be signs of severe mental illness. That is why it is so vital that those who experience sometimes frightening rather than calming visions, share their experiences with trusted and skilled resources who can help them determine if they are gifts of God, or if untreated, potentially the beginnings of mental pathology.

But without experiencing visions of the transfigured Christ, I would guess it fair to state that each of us has experienced “mountaintop experiences;” you know, those exhilarating times when you simply know that you have been transformed from this formerly “vanilla” and plain-old you, into this dynamic multiply-flavored and gifted servant of the Lord.

Church camps are often settings where you are out of your ordinary routines, typically in a beautiful natural location, and treated to skilled communicators and counselors who help you see Christ in a new way, understand the biblical message more fully, and where and when you just know that “the old days are gone, and the new days have come”.... until you get home, that is.

Then, to your chagrin, whether as a youth or adult, you learn that your parents, siblings, spouse, or best friends, rather preferred the “old you” and find the “new you” kind of preachy, and uppity, and they wonder when you'll snap back to be yourself again.

If you've experienced this, you'll know what a bummer this is.

I mean, here you were all fired up to serve Jesus, and those you hoped to influence the most are at the least unimpressed, and at the most quite frankly irritated by the “new you.”

If it's any comfort, the same thing happened to the disciples after their mountain-top experience, and even Jesus got grumpy and wondered how long he'd have to put up with such a pitiful generation of stiff-necked folk who didn't appreciate all he was

doing for them.

So, are mountaintop experiences counter-productive?

Not at all.

But are they the norm for the life of faith?

No, again.

Whether an historic or a symbolic image, we read that a select few disciples shared an unbelievable few moments of being in the flesh, and in the here and now, while glimpsing Jesus revealed in his post-resurrection glory, and conversing with Moses (likely as the representative of The Law), and Elijah (likely as the representative of the Prophets). Not bad, eh? For those into ecstatic religious experiences, this is a mind-blowing one.

But they, being human, want to freeze-frame the moment and Peter suggests memorializing it with some shrines. How like Peter, and how like us. Every church I've served has one or more "shrines" to a glorious past, or a beloved former pastor, or a room set aside with the "sacred relics," or a favorite way of doing worship. You know the routine.

But the perspective I believe we need to keep in mind today and always, is the reaction of Jesus. He realizes that Peter is just "blowing smoke" once again, with his mouth and his brain disengaged.

But he also knows that his call is not to remain in glorified form on the mountaintop. It is to go back down to that whiny, demanding, ever-present crowd, and to put up with yet another failure of his chosen followers, and to continue on to his ultimate sacrifice.

May the Lord grant us individually – and collectively – to know the will and the way of God for our personal and collective lives of faith.

Thanks be to God.