

Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 19, 2023  
“Down the Mountain” (Matthew 17:1-9)

I have found that, with most of us living here in North Carolina, we are either beach people or mountain people. As you know, I tend to gravitate toward the beach. There’s something about the sun, sand and surf that draws me there. However, I do like to go to the mountains on occasion, as well. I have fond memories of family weekends spent there. Away from the distractions of everyday life, I have enjoyed watching the sun rise and set, hikes with the grandchildren, fellowship around the fire pit, all the while surrounded by God’s marvelous creation.

Time spent there is so peaceful and serene, but passes so quickly. We could always stay much longer, getting closer to nature, getting closer to one another, and closer to God. However, we eventually have to come back down the mountain; back to the everyday routines of life, back to calendars filled with a flurry of activity, back to the real world. But I always bring something back with me. I bring a renewed spirit and a sense of family togetherness that is often absent in our busy lives.

So, even if we identify ourselves as beach people, we like the mountains, as well. We even describe some of the great moments in our lives as mountaintop experiences. But we can’t stay on the mountain forever, can we? Still, we can take with us what we experienced on the mountain.

A young woman made an announcement one morning to her co-workers: *My honeymoon is over and I am so relieved. Now we can get on with our marriage.* That’s the way it is with our mountaintop experiences. We can’t live there forever. It’s just too much. The emotional level is too intense. It becomes a relief to return to our normal lives where we can be ourselves; but that doesn’t mean the honeymoon is forgotten. Just because we don’t live on the mountain all the time doesn’t mean we forget what happened on the mountain.

In our gospel text for today, Jesus and three of his disciples went up a mountain to rest, to pray, and to be renewed. They went for what was intended to be a short, spiritual retreat. But the disciples had a mountaintop experience they would never forget; one that would change their lives forever. On that mountain, they saw the glory of Jesus revealed and heard a voice from heaven saying, *This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.*

I can’t begin to imagine how the disciples must have felt. I can imagine that they wanted the moment to last; their time with Jesus to be prolonged. But Jesus didn’t allow them to stay too long. He brought them back down the mountain; back to the real world, back to their ministry. Likewise, we are eventually led down from our mountaintop experiences and back into other areas of life.

There are many kinds of mountaintop experiences we could name, but today, I want to hold up worship as a mountaintop experience because worship is that occasion where we most often experience God. When we come to worship, hopefully we come expecting God to be revealed to us, even if it’s not earth-shattering. We come expecting some word from the Lord, even if it is a

word we've heard many times before. Here, some ray of hope ought to lift our spirits and encourage our best actions.

That mountaintop experience may happen when a hymn we've sung hundreds of times speaks to us in a fresh, new way. It may happen when we hear in the words of scripture something we have never heard before. It may happen when we gather at the Lord's table and take on a new and deeper appreciation of the price that was paid for our salvation. However it happens, worship ought to be the one place we can count on to experience something from the Sacred, whether it be in a bold and glorious way or in a still, small voice.

In some churches, members get so caught up in the emotion of the moment, that worship becomes entertainment. It is a performance that the congregation is asked to sit back and enjoy. But if the focus is on ourselves and the emotions we feel, how faithful we are being to the God we worship? Still, this style of worship attracts many. Why? Because people are drawn to the mountaintop highs. We want things to be interesting. We want to be entertained. In short, we want to stay on the mountain. But in scripture, being on the mountain was about experiencing some word from the Lord and some assurance that God was with his people. The mountain had nothing to do with entertainment; but it had everything to do with focusing on what God was doing and what God was calling his people to do. People who come to worship to be entertained for an hour will surely leave empty and disappointed.

Worship, as I said, is about experiencing God and being in his presence; so when we come to worship, we should come to publicly give thanks to our God. And in this act of giving thanks, the unseen, mysterious, but ever-present God works in us, reshaping us into the people of God. Something happens here that forms us into a community of faith that lives by certain guiding thoughts and principles. Here God says to us, *This is my son; listen to him*. Here the truly important things about life and living are revealed to us in ways that will not come to us anywhere else in our culture. Here on this mountain, we begin to see things differently. But, like the disciples, we can't get too comfortable. Just when we begin to understand some of what's going on, Jesus says, *It's time*, and we start back down the mountain.

For Jesus, there is a connection between what we experience on the mountain and what we do when we're away from the mountain. For Jesus, what happened on the mount of transfiguration helped him make his final journey to Jerusalem. For the disciples, what happened up there affected forever their devotion to Jesus and the proclamation of his gospel, even in the face of adversity.

The mountaintop and the cross go together. Therefore, our mountaintop experiences must bring us face to face with the realities of the world. The sanctuary must be seen alongside the homeless shelter; the fellowship hall alongside the soup kitchen. We must realize that what happens on Sunday is directly related to what happens the rest of the week. And if nothing happens the rest of the week – if there is no tending to the needs of the hurting, if there is no care for the poor, no service done in Jesus' name – then we have fallen very short of what we do on Sunday mornings.

Being a Christian assumes being part of a family. When we worship together we are molded into the people of God and formed into a community that lives and acts in the spirit of Christ. We don't come to church for some moralistic instructions about what to do and not to do (although that sometimes happens). Rather, we come to be in the presence of God and experience his love for us.

When we begin to realize that our worship is done in the presence of God, then we begin to realize that all of life is lived in that holy presence. Something happens when we worship. Sunday after Sunday, as we hear the story of Jesus told and retold, we are drawn into it more fully and begin to see the world through the lens of that old, old story. This, in turn, evokes a response in us, and that response is lived out daily as we serve the world that God loves so much.

The call of Jesus is to go up the mountain, to experience the Holy One, and see the world as God wills for it to be. The call of Jesus is also to come down the mountain and into the lives of those who are lonely, oppressed, or broken down by the burdens of life. So, you see, we need that time on the mountain to be with God and be renewed by his presence. That's the only way we can be of service to others.

God tells us, *This is my Beloved Son; listen to him!* And we should listen for we don't know from where he might call. It could be from the mountain or the street corner, from the sanctuary or the crisis center. One thing's for sure: we can't stay on the mountaintop. Eventually Christ calls us to come down the mountain. And it is what we bring down with us – the experience of being in the presence of God – that will empower us for service in the world.

Thank God for mountaintops. Amen.