

Mountain Top Experience©
2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9 February 11, 2018 Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Many of us have had, at some time in our lives, what has been called a “mountain top experience” where you go on a mission trip or a spiritual retreat and you are on such a high – you feel so close to God – you suddenly see things differently. It’s kind of a euphoric feeling that you think you never want to come down from.

These experiences don’t usually happen very often. I can only think of a couple in my lifetime: the senior high girls retreat, where I felt so close to God, could feel God’s presence nudging me to answer the call to become a missionary. That call, I think, eventually came into fruition in my call to ministry as a pastor – but of course – it wasn’t all mountain top joy getting to it.

Other experiences were events like the Emmaus Walk – the 72-hour women’s retreat where there were many moving worship experiences throughout that time. I hated to go home and come down off of that high spiritual place.

What has been your mountain top experience? Would you be willing to share one now?

One mountaintop experience from the Old Testament was when Moses, in Deuteronomy came down from Mt. Sinai after being with God. Moses’ face was shining with the glow of God’s presence still on him.

And today’s bible story was no less of a mountain top experience for Peter, James and John. What a thrill to see the Lord in his glory, light shining around him, prophets of old with him.

Curiosity has us wondering about a few things. First of all, I wonder why Jesus chose these three? Why not Matthew, Mark, Phillip or Bartholomew?

Have you noticed in most of our bible stories we read more about Peter, James and John than the rest of the disciples? These three were the inner circle of friends who were with Jesus when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead (back in Mark 5). They were eye witnesses to that miracle and of course, to others. And if we look ahead, we read in chapter 14 that these were the three whom Jesus asked to go on further with him in the Garden of Gethsemane just before he was arrested.

In the Gospel of John, John refers to himself often as “the one whom Jesus loved.” I’m not sure about why James was always included, although James was John’s brother and the two of them were called “Sons of Thunder.” I think they were strong leaders – or were learning to be.

Peter, just six days before this amazing event, had professed that he believed Jesus was the Messiah – the Christ. And then, right after that, Jesus started talking kind of crazy, really scary – telling them he was going to suffer and die and then rise from the dead.

It was too much for Peter. Peter took Jesus aside and scolded him for talking that way. That’s when we hear Jesus calls Peter Satan’s little helper. It was a very stern admonishment to the

disciple who had just professed his faith. You can bet they were still thinking about that incident that happened just six days ago.

But can't you imagine that these friends and followers of Jesus were confused and tired

– exhausted really. Perhaps they were also discouraged. Think about it – they had given up a lot to follow him. They were compelled to go with him and help in his ministry. They believed he was at least a powerful prophet who would make a difference in their difficult world.

They had witnessed amazing things with Jesus – healings and exorcisms, dead people rising to life. Jesus' preaching was far different than any they had ever heard. His stories were unusual. He was certainly a unique and amazing man.

But, sometimes we need more than a unique and special person in our lives, don't we? Sometimes we need something that is going to knock us off our feet with surprise and power – something that will give us the assurance – the affirmation that God is around.

Yes, we need glory. We need something to take us up and out of our every day hum drum fears and drudgery – something to get us through the coming trials and tribulations. We need transformation. Yes, we do.

And so did they. And Peter, James and John certainly got a pretty full vision of Jesus' glory that day, up on that mountain. They woke from their drowsy state and suddenly saw Jesus in dazzling white clothes, talking to two Old Testament prophets – Moses and Elijah.

And Peter, not really knowing what to say, blubbered out “We should build booths, Lord. One for each of you!”

Well, that's what they did in the Old Testament when they thought the last days were upon them after the Day of Atonement. (Leviticus 23), the day God commanded Moses and the Israelites to offer sacrifices for their sins.

So, it sounds ridiculous that Peter offered that, and it was in a way, but Mark tells us, he said it because he was afraid and didn't know what else to say. I've been there before, haven't you? Open mouth and out comes something that makes no sense.

So, the transfiguration was an assurance to these 3 that Jesus truly was the Son of God; there was more than a prophet in him.

They did see him talking to the prophets, which connected him to them. The law of the Old Testament was being fulfilled in Jesus.

Do you ever wonder how they knew it was Moses and Elijah? Brian Stoffregen, from Crossmarks resources raised that question in his commentary. He wondered if there were pictures on the walls of the synagogues of Moses and Elijah. Or if they had their names printed on their white robes.

I guess they just knew. In a unique setting where your vision is quite different, I guess you know without knowing maybe.

With the offer of building the 3 booths for each of these dazzling men in white, it sounds like Peter was, besides being confused and maybe afraid, thrilled too. And who wouldn't be? To see this glimpse of heaven, of glory, right before your eyes. You would never be the same. You would prefer to stay there with Jesus in that very special unique moment in time.

No one would want to come down – back to the old messiness of life – that place where others are not so happy. They haven't seen glory so why would they be that happy? And why wouldn't they be slightly irritated with you for being so happy?!

Actually, that does happen. When I was involved with the Walk to Emmaus and Chrysalis Movement – there was so much inspiration, joy and thrilling spiritual highs on those weekend retreats that we didn't want to leave. But then when we did leave we wanted to share that joy with everyone else. Only oftentimes we ended up sort of knocked down by those who had not been there.

As a kid did you ever go to camp and find the worship experiences so great and then come home to find disappointment in how things were at home?

I have a United Methodist friend who trains missionaries who says that those young, new missionaries are on such a high when they go to help others somewhere. They get what he calls “goeey affirmations” and they would love to stay there on that mountaintop. But it is the hard, dirty work of daily life that we have to come down for, and that really takes up most of our time.

It was good for Peter, James and John to have that amazing vision of Jesus' glory. To see the connection with the prophets of old and then to see they were gone. Now, there is nothing else besides Jesus, the King of Glory.

It was important for them to witness this glory – to have that assurance, because they were heading right smack into the most horrible time of their lives when Jesus' prediction of his suffering, death and resurrection would be fulfilled. And they too would endure all sorts of obstacles to ministry and eventually face death themselves for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the Gospel.

They needed this glimpse of glory to help them endure; to help them persevere. Jesus told them not to say anything to anyone until after he had risen. For now, it was just for them.

Do we still have these glory experiences today? Do you ever really expect to meet God head on in worship - to collide with the divine glory of Christ? Annie Dillard once wrote, “Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke (in worship)? . . . We should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares.” I found that rather humorous, but if you think about it, if we really expected to see the glory of God, or to experience the power of the divine, we would probably come crawling into worship and hide under the pews!

As a preacher, I pray for a transfiguration moment – for myself and for you. But, I suspect those moments only happen rarely – and they are always unexpected. It is nothing we can manipulate, or create ourselves.

BUT ... even in saying that ... we still work with that in mind. We are, after all, Kingdom people. We live and serve in a manner that is always open and always expecting to see little glimpses of glory.

I think we see those little glimpses of glory in each other – occasionally. I know I see it shining around the table at Session meeting and at our Team meetings. In those who are doing particular ministries in the name of Jesus Christ and for his sake; helping us to be the hands and feet of the Lord.

I saw reflections of Christ's light, his glory, on your faces, as you come together, singing, worshipping, talking, praying, sharing tears and laughter.

God's glory is shining here for us in this moment, giving us vision, giving affirmation that we are alive and vital in the community and the world.

Mountain top experiences are wonderful and unique. They occur only once in a while, I think for the purpose of giving assurance of who our Savior is, making it worth working in the valleys of life when we are down from the mountain. If we know Jesus is Lord, we can endure just about anything.

And while the dazzling light is memorable, the command is to listen. God says this is my Son, listen to him. What he says is true and important. Believe him. He will suffer and you probably will to. Mountain tops don't last. But God's love we cannot be separated from will last into eternity and beyond.

We do not go down the mountain alone. The Spirit is always with us; always speaking and leading us on.

Jesus was transfigured that day – transformed. And we are being transformed also – into a new creation.

Thanks be to God!