

Scripture:

Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-43

Mountaintops

"I have been to the mountaintop," said Dr. King, and even people who live in low-lying seacoast towns know what he was referring to. The image of the mountaintop runs through Scripture as that place where the human experience touches the Divine, that symbolic place where God is present and mere mortals can catch a glimpse of ultimate truth. And so we fondly recall those mountaintop experiences that happen on retreat or at church camp, upon some extraordinary accomplishment or in some exotic destination--where the cares of this world seem to recede and we are better able to understand who we are and why we are here on this planet.

In Exodus, Moses and Joshua ascend the mountain to speak directly to God. Likewise, Jesus takes his disciples up the mountain where suddenly they encounter a transfigured Christ, radiant and filled with light. Two men appear--the apostles assume it is Moses and Elijah, both patriarchs in the Hebrew Scripture who were taken up to heaven but did not die.

Peter doesn't really know what to do so he starts building dwellings. Perhaps he reverting to the comfort of what he knew? Maybe he was trying to busy himself with lesser things so that he didn't have to deal with the extraordinary that was happening right in front of him? Was he trying to contain these visions, put them in a box? Protect them from the elements? Capture the moment in a medium that he could understand--symbolic bricks and mortar?

Oh we know that road. And sometimes it is a road to take but sometimes it's simply a distraction. It is so very easy for us to get busy with the small things so that we don't have to face the big things. Yesterday some of us spent hours in a retreat - taking it slow - even the retreat let go of agenda so that we could soak in conversation and be with God and one another authentically. In this mountaintop moment God's voice interrupts and completely overwhelms the disciples, and says "This is my son, my Chosen. Listen to him."

So often in mountaintop experiences - we are bolted into a moment when we learn we have to stop, redirect our focus and listen.

And if we really stop and pay attention we will recognize we simply can't control it. Any attempt to put God in a box--is futile and we're compelled to yield to the power of the force that fills the moment, a force so powerful that it can change your life forever and even, as in Dr. King's vision, change the whole of society.

Still, Most of us don't live lives filled with daily mountaintop experiences. At least I don't. I live in the midst of human interactions, not in the transcendence. I work in a profession and live in a world, where individuals and groups come into conflict across lines of faith and culture, race and religion, lifestyle and ideology. And I would guess this is where you live your life (most of it, anyway) as well.

Today I want to talk about the presence of God all around us...if we have eyes to see it. God is on the mountaintops and in the valleys and even present in the plains of life. Most of us know the story of Moses when he has one of those moments. When he is walking along in the Sinai Peninsula and there is a burning bush. And Moses heard God say "Moses, take off your shoes for you are on holy ground." Moses knew in that moment beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had spoken to him. He knew right then that God was real. It happened to him again only a short while later when he went up to the top of Mount Sinai and he was surrounded by a swirling cloud and he encountered the presence of God and the Ten Commandments were produced. Moses knew that God was with him and that God was real.

Today's gospel tells the story of when Peter and James and John ascend Mount Tabor above the village of Nazareth. In that place Moses came to them in a cloud and they heard the voice of God say. "This is my beloved Son, Jesus. Listen to him." In that moment they knew God had spoken to them and they knew God was real.

Many of you here will have had one or more of those rare moments when you know you are not alone, when you know that God has talked with you. When you know and feel the intervention of God in your life. I have had those moments. I recall a time when I was living in Switzerland and I was hiking by myself in the midst of the alps. It was a warm summer day and the horseflies were biting. I was on a life journey I was a recent university grad and I was taking some time abroad on my own. I had just heard news of a good friend being killed in a motorcycle accident, I also knew that my family had decided to move from our family home of 25 years and I was not there to assist and to make it worse I had learned that my dad was suffering from his rheumatoid arthritis so badly that he was regularly bedridden. Here I was on the other side of the world feeling helpless and I needed to know that God would take care of them. I walked and I prayed and I asked God for a sign and in that moment suddenly out of nowhere a raincloud appeared and what I quickly declared showers of blessings began to fall. I can't describe it in human words because... well, the moment was divine... it was an ordinary miracle.

Maybe I just turn ordinary experiences around but I can name several times when I have been in awe of God's presence both when I have been in a happy moment and when I have been in a dark one. My experience is that God is forever coming to us. God comes to us in those special moments, and those special moments may be in the form of a healing. It may be in that exotic moment that we have been convinced that we have been healed by God or our child has been healed and our hearts are convinced that God has given us healing. My mother shares of a time when she was young (she is the oldest of twelve) her third youngest sister was born and almost died from complications at birth. She tells the story of kneeling at the bedside with her father and hearing him pray for healing of his baby and promising God that from that moment on he would be faithful and listen to God. Aunt Becky is alive and well today and it is one of my mother's mountaintop stories. She and my Grandfather in that moment felt the presence of God.

I know that sometimes it takes getting away from routine and that is why for years I have tried to retreat with this congregation and maybe one day we will. Some of us had a beautiful retreat

right here in this space yesterday but we find it so very hard to stop, to get away to reboot and reflect we simply don't have the time. That is why we will spend our lenten series focusing on reconnecting with the unbusy God. (but that starts next Sunday). So many of you have shared with my stories of ordinary miracle moments, stories of healing moments and stories of God moments when you have been in the depths of despair.

The story after the transfiguration is often left out of the reading but I always put it in because it is the key to the whole event. The disciples and Jesus came off the mountain, and they came right down to the bottom of the valley. They came off the mountain and they came down into the valley and they found a boy who was having epileptic seizures. The mother and father were enormously upset and worried about the desperately sick boy, and the little boy fell into a fire and burned himself. In other words, the disciples came down off that mountaintop right into the problems of real life. Home from a mountaintop vacation and into the real world at home. And the disciples discovered that God is also down in the valley and does not live only or even primarily on the mountaintop.

We all know what happens the day after coming down from the mountain. It is the real world and the real life. After Sundays of life, there are always Mondays. You know, the tough ones of life. God is with us there.

So admittedly as I was writing this sermon last night after having a weekend of messy church and a retreat on slowing down most of the day yesterday I was feeling tired and having trouble getting creative. Which saddened me a bit because I had, had a beautiful weekend and I actually love this story and I love to preach on it but I wanted to hear a new story. So I went to Macky and I said. Tell me about a mountaintop experience, an experience of God you have had. And he said "like every time we went to the mountaintop we prayed and we took God with us." And he shared something about being in combat and with the kids talking behind me and the business of the house I drifted off thinking oh you don't get what I'm asking and I went back upstairs to try and write a sermon in the quiet - and then I read a reflection by Edward F. Markquar. He shared "One time, we pastors were talking with each other about many things, and we were having some arguments with each other, as we normally do and did. We were discussing what was more important, Easter or Good Friday. I bet none of you laity have that kind of discussion but preachers do. We were arguing which was more important, Easter or Good Friday. Finally, one particular pastor became emotional and he said simply, "Good Friday." "Good Friday is the most beautiful day for me. Every day is Good Friday for me." We asked, "Why do you say that, Lee?" And he told the following story. Lee had been in the Korean War, and he was a CIA agent. He and a group of CIA agents had been flown up into North Korea, and had been dropped there for a landing. They went secretly into North Korea, blown up some ammunition dumps, made a raid on a secret installation and after that, they were coming back to their point of pick up. They were going to rendezvous and be flown back to their ship. On the way back, Lee, this friend of mine, made a mistake and he got separated from the other CIA agents. He made a mistake; he was clear about it. It was his dumb fault. Lee got caught in this sniper fire. He jumped behind a rock and there were a group of enemy soldiers up above him, shooting at him below as he was hiding behind a large rock. The bullets were pecking against this rock and making the rock smaller.

Every time that a flick of the rock would hit him in the back, Lee thought that he was dead. He would roll over in panic, thinking that he had been shot in the back. It was a petrifying experience for him. His mouth was dry, white mouthed, dehydrated. Suddenly, his fellow agents came back to rescue him. It was like the cavalry had come in the old west movies. The cavalry had come back to save him, to cover up his mistake. But...six of his fellow agents, his good friends, were then killed...because of the mistake that he had made. As he told this story, he said, "Yes. I have carried this guilt with me for a long time now, and Good Friday will always been the most important day for me because Good Friday was that day that God came down to die for us, to pay for the enormous mistakes that we have made. I will always preach a Good Friday sermon because every sermon for me is about the cross. That God came to die for us in our mess. I believe that."

Whoa. We were speechless and silent."¹

I read this and I suddenly realized what Macky was talking about and discovered that maybe he did understand my question, and I was reminded of how fortunate I am. How I have never had to fight for my life - I mean really fight for my life but I can imagine that those who have and have prayed their way through it have had an experience of God that I will likely never know. But every one of us have fought for life in some way or another and I believe that even in those moments God is with us. God is not only with us on the mountaintop but God is with us the next day at the bottom of the mountain. You know what it is like down at the bottom of the mountain. You know what it means to experience the severe illness and death of children or a spouse or a parent. You know what it means to have trauma in your marriage. You know what it means to have one of your friends die much too early and much too painfully. You know what it is like to be down at the bottom of the mountain. And you know that God is with you and you know that God speaks to you there and gives you the words of hope and strength for that time. For God is with us both on the mountaintops and in the valleys. And God is with us in the plains, in the ordinariness of life.

Honestly, we don't spend much time on the mountaintops nor do we spend a lot of time down in the valley. Where we spend most of our time is living plain, ordinary days and what I have come to know is that if I open my spirit and my eyes I discover God is also in the plain ordinary life as well.

When the disciples are on the mountaintop God says "Listen to Jesus" The disciples descended the mountain and listened to his life and they discovered that when we choose to connect with love every moment we discover healing on the mountaintops, in the valley's and even on the ordinary plain days of life. So go from this place and discover God in an ordinary day so that you too may be taken to the mountaintop and know that God is real.

Amen.

¹ http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_a_mountains_valleys_and_plains.htm

