

GOING TO THE MOUNTAINTOP

a sermon based on Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

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A brilliant magician was performing on an ocean liner. But every time he did a trick, the Captain's parrot would yell, "It's a trick. He's a phony. That's not magic."

Then one evening during a storm, the ship sank while the magician was performing. The parrot and the magician ended up in the same lifeboat. For several days they just glared at each other, neither saying a word to the other. Finally the parrot said, "OK, I give up. What did you do with the ship?" The parrot couldn't explain the last trick! It was too much to comprehend, even for a smart parrot. Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Scholars over the years have tried to explain what in the world Peter meant by this suggestion. Many agree that he thought, now that Moses and Elijah had appeared with Jesus, they might be staying. In which case, it made sense to him to set up three tents for them to live in.

It's very possible that Peter was so overwhelmed when he saw Moses and Elijah that he responded with the first thing that came to mind because, in fact, he couldn't fully comprehend what was happening.

In life, there are moments that are beyond our understanding. There are mountaintop moments and valley moments throughout life that are impossible to comprehend. The birth of one's own child. The loss of a loved one. Falling in love. These are all mountaintop moments. September 11 was definitely a collective valley moment for the United States. We are never ready for them. They arrive unannounced, changing us in irreversible ways. But there is one thing they all have in common. They demand that we be silent and listen. These moments have something to say to us, to teach us, if we will be silent and listen..Sometimes, however, our response is like that of Peter. We talk as a way of trying to organize our thoughts. We say and do inexplicable things to buy time while trying to figure things out. When Peter does finally quit talking, a cloud appears and envelopes all of them and then a voice, which we are left to assume is the voice of God, announces "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to Him!" [Mt. 17:5] That's it. Short and to the point. And yet, it was packed with meaning.

This event in Jesus' life has some interesting parallels to that of Moses on Mt. Sinai. Both Moses and Jesus took along one or more trusted companions who would later be able to testify as to what happened. Moses took Joshua. Jesus took Peter, James and John. They both went to a mountaintop. Both Moses and Jesus

encountered God on the mountaintop and were identified as God's anointed. In Both instances, the encounter is called an epiphany, a miraculous revelation of the Divine. Moses' epiphany caused his appearance to take on a radiance that was so bright the Hebrews knew beyond a doubt that he had seen God when he was up on the mountaintop. In Jesus' epiphany, his appearance also changed: "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." [Mt. 17:2] Then the voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" This change in appearance has been given the name: The Transfiguration.

To know what happened is one thing. It is quite another to comprehend what really happened.

Earlier Jesus had been with his disciples discussing his identity. "Who do the people say I am?" he asked his disciples. "Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist" came the replies. "But who do you say I am?" Jesus asked. You remember Peter's answer? "You are the Christ. The Son of the living God!"

Also at this time Herod had learned about Jesus and he thought Jesus was John the Baptist back from the dead. Herod had John beheaded and now Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist coming back to get him. So all these questions are surfacing about the identity of Jesus. I have a story.

Several decades back an inventor had a daring vision for a better kind of watch. After working on his idea for some time and building a prototype, he decided to go to Switzerland, the world capital of watchmaking, to seek backing for the manufacture of his new design. When the renowned Swiss watchmakers examined his invention, they said, "This is not a watch. It doesn't have hands to tell time. It just has little numbers. You have to have a big hand and a little hand to make a watch." Then, when they opened the back, they were even more negative. "This thing doesn't even have gears or springs or jewels. It is just a lot of electronic parts. This thing is not a watch!" And they would have nothing to do with it.

So the inventor took his revolutionary idea to Japan where he found industrialists who weren't so sure what made up a watch and who agreed to manufacture his idea.

As a result, most watches today are electronic and are made in the Far East instead of Switzerland. And now you know the rest of the story!

Jesus didn't look like the REAL Messiah. The disciples may have had doubts as to whether Jesus was the Messiah or not because he didn't seem to fit the image of what the Messiah was supposed to look like. They expected a great king, a mighty warrior. They weren't looking for a guy who believed that when a person strikes you, you should turn the other cheek so he can strike you again! They weren't looking for a guy who wanted you to love your enemies. They weren't looking for a guy who would have dinner with a tax collector and say that salvation had come

to his house. They couldn't believe he was the real thing because he didn't look like the Messiah was supposed to look.

It would seem that his disciples were still having their doubts about Jesus. So, Jesus takes his inner circle up to the mountaintop and it is here that they learn in a definitive way who Jesus is. He is the new Moses, the return of Elijah. He is the Anointed One of God.

But don't you think they would have figured it out by now? After all, they'd witnessed the miracles, they'd seen his compassion, they'd heard his teaching. Why did they take so long figuring it out? I have another story.

Writer Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He was nervous and tense and about to burn-out.

In his book, *Stress Fractures*, Swindoll writes, "I was snapping at my wife and our children, choking down my food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated at those unexpected interruptions through the day. Before long, things around our home started reflecting the patter of my hurry-up style. It was become unbearable.

I distinctly remember after supper one evening, the words of our younger daughter, Colleen. She wanted to tell me something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, "Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast." Suddenly realizing her frustration, I answered, "Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly."

I'll never forget her answer: "Then listen slowly."

It is possible that the disciples weren't listening slowly. They were rushing to one conclusion after another. After all, it had been an action-packed journey for the past two and a half years and they had seen some pretty amazing things. In fact, down-right miraculous things! He had taught them and the multitudes and his words conveyed more wisdom than the average person. They heard him but did they really.....HEAR him? Perhaps they were so caught up in the day-to-day events that they couldn't see who he really was. They couldn't hear what he was really saying.

But then, he took Peter, James and John up on the mountain. They were probably used to his retreats by now, going off to talk to God his Father. They may have wondered how Jesus was so comfortable with God. To them, God had been accessible only through worship in the synagogue or when they made pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. He talked to God as though God were really listening and responding to him. And here they were, on the mountaintop with Jesus and, of all people, Moses and Elijah dropped by for a visit. Then the voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Wow! Imagine that!

We are told that Jesus was transfigured in their presence. But Jesus wasn't the only one who was transfigured that day. Those three disciples were transfigured as well. They were changed in a way they could never have imagined. They had heard God, the Father-God with whom Jesus spoken so easily all the time, and they began to understand that they could talk with God as their father, also. He could be found anytime and everywhere, not just the synagogue or on festival days or in the temple in Jerusalem. I have a story.

In his book, *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Home for Our Time*, Desmond Tutu tells about a transfiguration experience that he will never forget. It occurred when apartheid was still in full swing. Tutu and other church leaders were preparing for a meeting with the prime minister of South Africa to discuss the troubles that were destroying their nation. They met at a theological college that had closed down because of the white government's racist policies. *During a break from the proceedings, Tutu walked into the college's garden for some quiet time. In the midst of the garden was a huge wooden cross. As Tutu looked at the barren cross, he realized that it was winter, a time when the grass was pale and dry, a time when almost no one could imagine that in a few short weeks it would be lush, green, and beautiful again. In a few short weeks, the grass and all the surrounding world would be transfigured. As the archbishop sat there and pondered that, he obtained a new insight into the power of transfiguration, of God's ability to transform our world. Tutu concluded that transfiguration means that no one and no situation is "untransfigurable." The time will eventually come when the whole world will be released from its current bondage and brought to share in the glorious liberty that God intends.* [pp 2-3]

Jesus invites us up to the mountaintop to experience God's unconditional love which can and will transform us into the person God calls us to be.

And let the people say, "Amen."