

Have You Been to the Mountaintop?

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
22 February 2004
Text: Luke 9:28-37

Think of a moment that changed your life.

Maybe it was a single, crystallizing event;
an unforgettable relationship;
a decision, at a crossroads where you had to choose one
path...or another. It may have been a moment that last a split second, or
one you struggled with for years. Maybe you realized its significance
immediately, or maybe you understood it only later, looking back.

Whatever it was, however it happened, you *knew*: this is not "nothing."
This is something.

I call these "transfigured moments" because they change the shape of our
lives forever. They can be dramatic or ordinary moments, but somehow
they awaken us, jar our perceptions cause us to look at life differently
than we did before.

Making love in the truest sense of that expressive phrase is a
transfiguring moment. So is the birth or adoption of a child. Music can
transfigure a moment like little else. Prayer and solitude can create
transfigured moments in this blaring, busy world of ours. Some people
have the grace to allow periods of suffering and heartache to transfigure,
rather than disfigure their lives. Some of my own transfigured moments
have happened huddled in a sleeping bag watching the sun come up over
the Rocky Mountains.

Let your personal transfigured moments provide a point of reference for
the morning scripture text. It too tells of a turning point, an experience
of profound illumination, that made all the difference to the disciples
when their world came crashing down around them a short time later
when their leader was crucified.

The shadow of Jesus' death hangs over this text. His words and actions
have repeatedly brought him into conflict with both civil and religious
authorities, and there have been barely-disguised threats on his life. In
the immediately preceding passage, Jesus himself tells the disciples that
he will undergo great suffering and be killed. Now he takes three of
them up a mountain to pray. Mountains in ancient religious traditions—

Judaism included—were considered points of contact with God, because they were the places where earth touched heaven. Contemporary sociologists and theologians in a similar vein speak of “thin places” – where the boundary between the material and spiritual world is very porous. Let us join them on the mountaintop, as we seek God’s word in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the ninth chapter, at the 28th verse [Luke 9:28-37]

A telling scene in the provocative film *Dogma* has the priest of an inner-city parish struggling with how to make the gospel more compelling among the members and out in the community. He explains that the cross is such a downer, and sacrifice such an unattractive message, that he devises a new, more upbeat image for the faith. The new icon is a statue of Jesus with a confident grin on his face, offering a thumbs-up salute; it’s entitled “Buddy Jesus.” The movie makes the point that accessibility alone doesn’t translate into a deity worthy of following. “Buddy Jesus” proves completely ineffective in confronting evil, in changing the rebellious human heart, and in making a true difference in a tattered and torn world.

The scriptural depiction of the transfiguration provides a helpful corrective to God as a buddy we create and thus control. What we have here in contrast is a portal into the glory of God, the holy mystery of the world beyond rational knowing. On one level I don’t think we can begin to “get” the transfiguration—certainly human language is inadequate to describe this vision. If we get too bogged down in explanations of the light, the booming heavenly voice, the appearance of ghosts of ancient leaders, we’ll miss its significance for us post-enlightenment people, so long on facts, so short on faith. Instead, perhaps it is to be seen as a “thin place,” an experience that provides knowledge of the glory of God which is beyond human invention or control.

Some elements of the story are familiar: the figures of Moses and Elijah represent “the Law and the prophets”—historical evidence of the covenant relationship God had with the people. Their discussion of his eminent departure—the word literally means “exodus” –is a reference to the liberating consequence his death will have for the people enslaved by sin. The voice from the cloud speaks identical words to the ones spoken at Jesus’ baptism: This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!” Jesus is not just another human leader; he is imbued with divine power, God’s very Self, and worthy of following. And then there’s the sleepiness of the disciples; once more failing to grasp the truth right under their noses. Peter’s reaction to build three dwellings resonates with our own need to make sense of mystery: to make it fit into our rational expectation of reality, to make it permanent, to turn it into a ritual, to make it

accessible. But God's ways are not our ways, my friends. God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

Peter is awed into silence, and the text specifically mentions that the disciples never spoke about this experience until later, when they came to see the light of Christ's glory in the dark night of death, and in the mystery of resurrection. Ironically, the Church refers to this incident as the Transfiguration of Jesus, but the ones who really get changed are Peter, James, and John. The encounter filled them with awe and wonderment, but also provided them with a touchstone of Jesus' identity and mission that would ultimately determine the trajectory of their own.

Easy for them to say, after being on the mountaintop, right? I agree with you that the clarity of this particular transfiguring moment is not normative for people of faith. But that doesn't mean that the glory of God remains inaccessible to us. It isn't by accident that the biblical vision occurred when they were praying, in a posture of openness and expectation. They didn't go alone, but were in the company of companions who shared their journey.

Spiritual enlightenment rarely just "happens," but is given as a gift to those who seek it and are attentive. Yet how easy it is to drift, to be consumed by calendar and routine until our spiritual eyes are dulled to the divine light permeating the whole creation. I love the story told of Joan of Arc when she was brought before the Pope on charges of heresy and insubordination to the Church. She explained that God had spoken to her and commissioned her to act. The Pope responded by asking, "And why would God speak to you, a peasant girl, and not to me?" Joan's reported answer? "Perhaps he is, sir, and you are not listening."

The mountaintop experiences that transfigure our ordinary days are crucial for a faith that perseveres amid the challenges and complexities of life. They offer us vision that gives us hope when all the evidence points to despair. In what turned out to be Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech delivered on the eve of his assassination, he spoke of the difficult days that lay ahead: *but it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. . . .but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any[one]. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.* [I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the

World by Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James Melvin Washington, HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, 1992]

Have you been to the mountaintop? Have your eyes gazed upon God's glory? The telling conclusion of the transfiguration account gives us a clue about opening ourselves to such an experience. It begins, curiously, not on the mountaintop, but down in the world where Jesus always takes his followers.

Jesus led his disciples back down the mountain, back down to where human life is lived. Their transfigured moment was to prepare them for the work ahead: for healing, witnessing, teaching, giving, loving, keeping on.

Because finally, friends, life is more than a perpetual sunrise over the Rocky Mountains. There are hungry hearts and hurting voices in the valley below which need our attention and care. Our bright moments of clarity and inspiration are not intended as ends in themselves, but as means by which we are fortified to offer ourselves as instruments of God's peace. By which we come to make a difference in the world. We seek the transfigured moments to strengthen and sustain us, especially as we discover that the way of Jesus will take us to a cross. In following him, spirituality and service become two parts of a whole—the one leading surely to the other and back again.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH FAR MORE THAN ANYTHING WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND IN CHRIST JESUS TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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