

**“Mountains of Glory, Valleys of Love”**  
**A Sermon for the Last Sunday after The Epiphany (B)**

*“Jesus led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them.” — Mark 9:2*

I’ve enjoyed watching recently a PBS program of some years ago called Kingdoms of the Sky. In stirring words and breathtaking images, it describes both the majesty and the danger, the beauty and daily struggle of life in the mountains, in the highest places on earth.

As you might imagine, such a life is not for the faint-hearted. Both animals and humans face enormous challenges at these great altitudes—everything from crippling frostbite to gnawing hunger, from fearful isolation to sudden avalanche. Yet some hearty souls come to the mountains, nonetheless, for adventure, in order to test themselves, to climb mountains because, well, after all they’re there! But others, not having the same luxury, must live at these heights, and so must work and survive in order to feed their families and to sustain a way of life passed down through generations. All of this takes place amid a vast and diverse array of wildlife that must eat and sleep, compete and (yes!) mate while clinging perilously to the sheerest cliff. (Finding love at 20,000 feet has its risks!)

And yet what the program showed most compellingly, I think, is the special lure that mountains hold for us, and the inviting sense of mystery we attach to them. In spite of the dangers and hardships, the mountains afford a way for many to escape the unexciting, humdrum, sometimes stagnant life of the valley, and to ascend where the air—and one’s thoughts—seem somehow clearer, purer, more focused. The mountains beckon with the promise of wider vistas and deeper visions. Their appeal is universal and irresistible.

This may suggest the reason why St. Mark in his Gospel, as do Luke and Matthew in their gospels, all narrate the same extraordinary event, one that clearly held a central place in the original Jesus story—the account of the Transfiguration, of Jesus transformed both in personal appearance and messianic stature before awestruck disciples. This may also be the reason why the Church in its wisdom has chosen this majestic event to be remembered in the liturgical calendar just prior to the start of Lent; not only to signal a climactic end to Epiphany, the season of light, but also to serve as encouragement while entering that more austere season. For Lent, as we know, is dominated by another, much different kind of mountain—the mount of Calvary, the place in which we recall not our Lord’s grandeur, but rather his agony, his suffering and sacrifice.

It is as though the Church is telling us what Jesus, through the Transfiguration, is silently telling those chosen apostles. The days ahead will be devastating (he might be saying); the sense of loss and betrayal will seem too great a burden to bear. You may want to give up; you may wish to walk away. You may want to deny that you ever knew me. But when that time comes, remember this moment. Remember how I appeared along side Moses and Elijah! Remember how my garments shone. And, most of all, remember what my Father—what your God and Father—said about me.

Remember all of this, and take heart, and gather courage from the memory. Here is something you can take with you to the valley. Here is a light that will shine through your darkness. Here is a foretaste of Easter morning that will sustain you through all the hours of Good Friday night.

Indeed, it is such a 'mountaintop experience' (as we famously call it) that has become synonymous with remembered inspiration, with a still fresh moment of insight and renewed strength. It's something that's inspired prophets and poets—and more than one martyred leader—throughout history to call their country, their people and their world to a bolder vision and more determined hope.

On the night before he was murdered, Martin Luther King summoned this very image even as he all but predicted his own death. In words that cannot be heard even today, many decades later, without emotion, he declared: "We've got some difficult days ahead. 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." Invoking the memory of Moses, he continues: "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. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. For 'mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'"

This is the kind of ecstatic joy, the kind of confidence and power and hope that one can find on the mountaintop, in the heights of imagination and vision, in the presence of the sacred. This is where God allows US to shine forth like the sun; and where the next voice we hear may not be the beating of our hearts, but the voice of God pointing the way to salvation and truth, while surrounding the Beloved, and our own souls, with glory and grace.

There's only one 'catch,' though, to savoring this mountaintop experience. In order to realize fully the dream of the mountain we have to leave it! We have to descend, and travel back from where we've come. And as any veteran mountaineer will tell you, that descent is where the greatest exertion, and where the greatest danger, so often lie. No one is quite sure the reasons for this. Whether exhausted by the initial ascent, or heady with a sense of triumph, or just dazzled by the remembered view, it's easy for the climber going down to stumble, easy to lose footing or concentration. So it's easy to think that conquering the mountain was our only goal, when in fact the way down is also the way of triumph and glory, a way leading to fulfillment, to greater awareness and understanding, and to a living out of those truths all that climbing taught us.

My dear friends, the mountain may be our retreat, our spiritual getaway, the place of vision and needed refreshment. But the valley is our home, the place where the hard, broad, embracing work of love begins and ends. Jesus knew this, even as he made his way down the mountain with, no doubt, still bewildered disciples. And he wants us to know this too, here in the valley. He wants us to know that wherever we walk or climb, however we work or serve, at whatever height or depth, we do it all in his name, the name of the Beloved, the Christ 'whose glory fills the skies,' and whose power and hope and joy fill our hearts. Amen.

Blessings,  
Fr. Gordon +