

“Visiting the Mountain, Living in the Valley”

Date: Feb. 15, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 9:2-9

Occasion: Transfiguration Sunday

Theme:

Many of us have had them, those times when we felt like we were on top of the world, really happy, confident that we knew all the answers or could solve any problem. Or, times when we felt we were really close to God, really in tune with God’s plan for us. In those moments, we were excited and alive and everything seemed new.

The moment might have come at some exciting event in your life: graduation, baptism, your first kiss, the first day on your first job, your wedding, the birth of a child. It might have been something really spiritual, like a week at church camp or on a church retreat.

Or, it might have been something of a smaller, quieter nature, like a very intimate conversation with your mother or father when you felt that they honestly understood what you were saying and why you felt the way you did.

We call these “mountaintop experiences.” And, oh how we hate to come down off that mountain. We want to hang on to that moment for as long as we can. “Let’s just stay right here and let the rest of the world go by for a while,” we say. But to freeze that one moment in time, well, it shuts off the possibility of the next moment.

In the Gospel reading for today, we hear the writer of Mark give his version of the event we call “The Transfiguration of Jesus.” Matthew and Luke also contain an account of this strange occurrence, with some minor variations in the telling.

It's one of those rare moments we were just talking about, one of those mountaintop experiences, which somehow defy adequate explanation and challenge us to ask, "Did that really happen?" Events such as the Transfiguration somehow connect us with the mystery of creation and eternity.

For Jesus, it was a time of confirmation and affirmation of his ministry. For Peter, James and John it was a brief glimpse of the transcendent, a peek at the reality that lies just beyond everyday life.

Worship has that possibility – of helping us to see the connection between here and now, and eternity. I'd like to suggest that going to the mountaintop is a metaphor for worship. In worship our earthly lives touch Heaven. Jesus can be seen in His glory. And we are prepared to go back down the mountain to live in the valley.

A young woman was talking to an older co-worker about church one day during lunch break. She asked her older friend, "Why do you go to church every Sunday? Does something happen there that can't happen somewhere else? And does it happen every Sunday?"

The older woman replied, "What happens is I go to meet God whom I've come to know in Jesus. Yes, God meets me in other settings than at church. However, I confess that I'm sure I miss most of God's appointments with me. I find that I live most of my life in a daze – as though I'm sleepwalking or on autopilot. I go to church to be reminded that my faith is real.

The younger woman then asks, "So, you go to church every week and God meets you there?"

The older woman answered, "I go to church every Sunday and for reasons that I can't explain, I meet God about one in every eight

worship services.” The younger woman asked, “They why do you go every Sunday?”

“I go every Sunday, said the older woman, “because I never know when that one Sunday is going to be.” Powerful story!

Peter, James and John had an awesome experience of being with Jesus on the mountain top. They wanted to stay there forever. For these disciples, the Transfiguration reveals Jesus’ true identity; they see Jesus unveiled in all of his glory before their eyes.

Elijah and Moses appear, validating that the Law and the Prophets have pointed to this man, God’s own Son. Here, without any ambiguity, the disciples learn from God that Jesus is indeed the long-awaited Messiah who will bring God’s salvation to the world.

Worship is intended to do that – to bring us into God’s presence, to reveal Jesus as God’s anointed One. We do have those kinds of worship experiences, don’t we? God shows up and we just don’t want that worship experience to end.

But here’s the thing. Worship is not meant be a perpetual high. Going to the mountain top prepares us for going back down and living in the valley. When the transfiguration was concluded, the disciples and Jesus walk back down the mountain.

In the next couple of stories that follow this one, Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees, he heals a blind man, and he warns his disciples that he must die. They argue with him. Being on the mountain was awesome. But they came back down.

No great mystery. After all, life is lived in the valley and not on the mountain top. We visit the mountain top, but we live in the valley.

Things are different between the two. If you read ahead in the gospel of Mark, the contrasts between mountain top and valley are stark.

On the mountain, we encounter Almighty God; in the valley, there is an encounter with the demonic. On the mountain we encounter our faith's heritage; in the valley we encounter those who turn questions of faith into a battle.

On the mountain, God's calming voice is heard; in the valley human arguments are heard. On the mountain, the disciples are ready for worship; in the valley the disciples are spoiling for a fight. On the mountain, the glory of the Lord is revealed; in the valley the power of sin and unbelief is revealed.

"O Lord, carry me away to the mountain," might be our prayer. YES, Lord! But then, we remember the place of our ministry is with those who need our help, down in the valley. We go to the mountain top to meet God. But then God sends us back down to live in the valley.

In worship, God prepares us to walk back down the hill to face the trivia and the traumatic. We go to the mountain to meet God – in worship – and He sends us back out into the world to deal with ordinary life, with all of its mundane and momentous experiences.

Transfiguration prepared Jesus for Calvary. Worship prepares the Christian for daily life. Transfiguration revealed Jesus in all his glory. Worship reveals who we can be, in Christ Jesus. We go to worship to meet God. And then God sends us back out into the world to do ministry.

We are blessed, so that we can share that blessing with others. May it be so, in each of our lives. Amen? Amen!