

Matthew 17:1-9

Jesus took 3 of his closest followers, the ones he could trust, up a path of a mountain. On top he met with God the Father, Moses and Elijah... another three of his beloved. I wonder what the disciples thought as they were climbing that mountain? If they thought they were going off to pray with Jesus, they were mistaken. Then, when Peter saw the real reason they were there he wanted to save the moment. Too bad they didn't have cameras then! Although, having a camera can be as much a deterrent to enjoying the moment as a helpful reminder for later. I remember one trip I took, and I can't remember where, but I spent so much time capturing pictures so that I wouldn't forget the trip, I didn't experience the time I was there in person.

Did Jesus take his disciples up the mountain simply to be witnesses to what was happening on the mountaintop, or did he take them to experience the moment? I think a little of both. What happened up there must have changed their perspective on who they believed Jesus to be. Before they were almost blindly following a man whom they believed to be the one to bring Israel back into power with military might. Now they witnessed Jesus in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and they heard the voice of God saying, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him." They were changed.

There's a prolonged student led worship service, 10 days without stopping as of yesterday, going on at Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky. Some are calling it a revival, others a great awakening. No matter what it is called it is attracting people from across the world to join in confession, prayer, and to experience God like they have never experienced God before. Lives are being changed. From what I am reading there are now over ten other college campuses experiencing the same on a smaller scale. Jesus is still changing lives.

The disciples knew they were in the presence of something worth witnessing. What they didn't know was that it was a pivotal time in the earthly life of Jesus. From this point on he was heading toward Jerusalem, towards his death on the cross. It is a time of change in our church year as well as we end the season of Epiphany and enter into the season of Lent. We too are heading toward Jerusalem, toward the cross and crucifixion. That is why, at the end of today's service we will bury the alleluia.

If you are new to this tradition, or even if you've been practicing it all your life, I think it is important to explain the significance of burying the alleluia. This term is not to be taken literally; we do not actually dig a hole and bury it, but we suspend its use during the season so that it re-emerges fresh and new on Easter morning. It is a kind of fasting from a familiar expression so that we will appreciate expressing it once again. When we retire something familiar for a season, recovering its use has a way of making it "new" for us. It has a way of giving emphasis to what precedes and follows it. Taking a rest from something gives shape and rhythm to life, to worship, to relationships – even to our relationship with God. Jesus intended for the three disciples to recognize the importance of being in the presence of God. We recognize that for our own selves as well.

Where are the places we meet God? We cannot determine where the Spirit blows, Jesus in John 3:8 when he was talking with Nicodemus said, "the spirit blows where it chooses." However we can create a state of mind that is open to the working of the Spirit. Here we are, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the last Sunday before the season of Lent begins, and we can make the choice to have a Lenten discipline. That doesn't mean we give up chocolate, salt or coffee for 6 weeks, it means we take a time set apart to experience God.

First, we pray. I'm sure some of you are praying already, if that is so, take it to a deeper level. Listen more than you speak or think. Consciously wait for God's message. Don't be discouraged if you experience nothing. The act of sitting at a time set apart waiting for God will change the rest of your day.

Another way is to read the Bible. I know some of you are doing that. If so, read not just to learn, but to experience God. Begin by praying for the Spirit to open you to the message. Read the same passage over and over. Ask yourself what God is saying to you in that passage. Hold it, let yourself be a part of the text. Again, you may not get any answers, but your day will be changed simply by spending time in God's word.

Something that those of you who are here already do is attend worship regularly. It sounds so obvious but why? Because we come to experience the presence of God. It doesn't happen all the time, but it does happen. So we prepare ourselves to worship and experience the presence of God. It changes our day, our week, and our life.

Through prayer, Bible reading, and worship we allow ourselves to be in a place where it is most likely we will experience the presence of God. It isn't guaranteed, but if you never open your self, it most likely won't happen.

Moses, in our reading from Exodus this morning put himself on a mountaintop to purposely be in the presence of God. But it took several attempts to accept the fact that God wanted to be present in his life. If you remember, Moses was born during a time when Pharaoh was killing off the Hebrew baby boys, but his mother wisely put him in the river where the Pharaoh's daughter bathed, hoping she would be curious and then adopt the child. Which of course she did.

After he grew up Moses killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew man. He thought no one saw it, but later discovered there were witnesses so he ran and started a new life in the country of Midian. As he was tending a flock of sheep on Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb, Moses saw a bush that appeared to be burning yet was not consumed by the fire. God called to Moses, telling him to take off his shoes because he was standing on holy ground. God then gave Moses a mission to go back to Egypt and lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt. Moses gave excuses as to why he couldn't, but God insisted and Moses went.

The Pharaoh did not want to lose his free workforce so he would not agree to let Moses lead the Hebrews out of Egypt until they experienced the last of the 10 plagues. What should have been a straightforward trip to the Promised Land turned into a lifetime journey because of the people's stubbornness about listening to God. It was during this journey that Moses again met with God on a mountain to receive the 10 commandments to guide a stubborn people in the right spiritual direction. Moses took the time away from his normal routine to be in the presence of God.

We can make ourselves available, but we don't have the guarantee that we will experience a mountaintop event like Moses, Peter, James and John. However our lives will be changed simply by taking the time to experience a time set apart. All glory be to God.