

Mountaintops and Valleys

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

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February 3, 2008 – Transfiguration Sunday

**Scripture Readings: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 99;
2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9**

According to our readings from Exodus, Moses goes up the mountain to meet God. And in our passage from Matthew, Jesus takes three of his disciples with him up a high mountain. Each of them encountered God's glory high on the mountaintop.

I got it.

Mountaintops are good.

So good the disciples don't want to leave the mountaintop.

But what about the people still in the valley?

Unlike the prophet, those every-day-kind-of-Israelites left behind while Moses communes with God.

Or one of the other disciples who didn't get to go to the mountaintop with Jesus.

The ones left behind in the valley.

And valleys?

Not so good. Not in scripture, anyway.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . ."

See what I mean? Not so good.

Valleys are low places. Low as in "I've been in a slump lately." Depressed places . . .

"I've been down" or "I feel low"

They are also dangerous places. We are vulnerable in valleys. Easy prey for our enemies or wild animals. One can be easily surrounded in a valley –overwhelmed.

They are scary places.

(Which is why, if you ask me, those Israelites built that golden calf while Moses was up on the mountain for all that time with God. They were frightened. They felt abandoned. They were low. They needed something to hold on to, something that they thought might offer them a little security, a little comfort. A little distraction. Something to numb the pain. A cookie, perhaps. Or a whole bag. A tranquilizer. A drink. Some shopping? Those golden calves take many forms.)

Well, of course it was silly.

Of course the golden calf couldn't do anything for them. Was a lie. Made matters worse.

But we don't do our best thinking when we are frightened, when we are depressed, when we are low. Fear blocks brain function, remember? And depression clouds our thoughts.

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(I didn't say I *agreed* with the choice to build the calf, I just said I understood it.)

We can make some really dumb choices when we are in a valley.

Like I said, low places make us vulnerable. And even our vision is limited.

It's easy to forget, when one is in a valley, that things will get better, can get better. The mountain may be right next to us, but all we see is shadow, and we can't imagine ever having the power to climb out of the valley. Powerlessness reigns in the valley.

We are no strangers to the valleys. If you aren't in one now, you've been in one before.

Some of us may be depressed, or fearful, or feel vulnerable: valley kinds of feelings.

We've had a few tough months here at Mount Auburn, in terms of some major crisis in the life of members of this church. This is a very loving church, and we ache when those we love ache. We do bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys.

It takes a toll. It can get us down.

And there are other things going on in each of our lives, as well. Not so public struggles at work, in relationships, financial difficulties, family problems or health issues.

Or people we love have been through some tough times and we have felt powerless, unable to do anything. And when people we love are hurting, or in danger of hurting themselves . . . well, that can make us pretty low.

On an even larger scale, speaking of powerlessness: the war drags on with no end in sight. Those who were managing to barely keep their heads above water are slipping with this shaky economy, and it always seems the weakest are the most vulnerable. I had an aunt who struggled with depression, and she just had to quit listening to the news and reading the newspaper, because it made her symptoms worse.

And even if you aren't in a valley now, you know what it's like because you've been in one before, And you know, because life is the way it is, that you may be in one again some time. Unless you are really, really good at denial. Try as we might to avoid them, no one can avoid those low spots for ever. Life is a series of ups and downs, highs and lows.

Mountains and valleys.

The only way to have no valleys is to not have any mountaintops either.

So, we may be having a little difficulty connecting with Jesus, Moses, Elijah and God's glory way up there on a mountaintop.

As a matter of fact, this both seem like a real turn for the weird, especially the second one.

The Transfiguration, observed traditionally in this last Sunday before Lent, brings Epiphany to a close with another divine irruption into the earthly. This is a tough passage for modern (and post-modern) Christians to swallow—apocalyptic visions seem irrelevant at best, escapist at worst.

But wait.

Moses and the Israelites were in a valley. A wilderness, even. After escaping from the shackles of slavery under the Pharaoh's rule into the wilderness, they were feeling as if they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire, so to speak.

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And then Moses went up the mountain to receive direction from God.

They had to be in the valley for Moses to get to the mountaintop.

It could not be by-passed. There are valleys at the foot of every mountain.

They cannot be avoided.

Jesus had just told the disciples that he was going to be put to death. He could see it coming. He was walking through the valley of the shadow of death. And that was when this mountaintop experience happened.

It is in the low times that we are open to the mountaintop. It is in the low times that we are open, broken open, to transformation.

For those of you who were here yesterday, and heard Phil's letter, that is exactly what Phil described. With his own death predicted, he experienced an epiphany, a life changing transformation. He was given clarity of vision, clarity of purpose, and deep and abiding joy.

There is mystery here, and mystery is difficult to put into words. I know that some of us may have a hard time with mystery – and rightly so – the term has been used by the church to thwart the questioning of some pretty bizarre teachings, many of us were asked to swallow whole. Like a spoonful of sugar, the word mystery, was meant to help the medicine go down.

So we were told that mystery was a word for things we can't explain or know.

But I don't believe that.

I have taken biology, I have read about the fertilization of the egg, the division that takes place, and I've seen photos of an embryo in all stages of life. But when I have been blessed to watch a baby come into the world, I am overwhelmed by the mystery.

You see, mystery exists when the more you know about something, the more you understand something, the more magical it seems.

And as I have said, mystery is hard to put into words.

There was mystery for those Israelites when Moses brought the first written word down from the mountain top. He glowed with the glory of God.

The disciples saw Jesus transfigured by God's glory.

And then Jesus himself, the Living Word, returned to valley.

Mountains represent thin places. Places of clarity. Places where epiphanies and revelations happen because we are open.

We don't get to them without being broken open in the valleys. You see, in the valley, our hearts can become thin places.

Jesus glowed with the glory of God, standing there with Moses and Elijah, and the disciples wanted to build booths and stay there on that mountaintop basking in God's glory. That was when God spoke.

"This is my Child, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him." God said.

And all this terrified the disciples. But mostly, mostly the part about listening to Jesus.

What had Jesus been saying that was so scary? He had been telling them about God's

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love and God's forgiveness. He had been feeding, healing, and teaching non violence and justice, acceptance and compassion. He had been teaching them what it means to be fully human.

And he had been telling them that the way to life was to take up a cross and follow him. That it is in dying that we find life.

(That's what Phil said yesterday, too. That in facing his own mortality, he found a new life. He was transfigured. God's glory shown in his life, his face, his smile. Phil became perfectly Phil!)

I saw it in my father when he was dying. For the first time in his life, I think my father, a workaholic, realized that he was loved for who he was, not for what he could provide or bring to the table or give . . . he was able to receive . . . and he was transfigured. He was more fully himself.

I have heard from Frank that the same thing was true of Kirk . . . always love and light, he, too, was transfigured . . . just more light and love . . . more Kirk)

There is mystery here.

Don't be afraid, Jesus told the disciples.

Don't be afraid. Death is not to be feared. There is nothing to fear. In this life or in death. Nothing.

And then (and I think this is important) as he led them down the mountain . . . he also told them not to tell anyone until after the resurrection. Because they wouldn't understand. They wouldn't get it: they wouldn't get that death is not to be feared, because death is not the end.

It is important that he said this as they were going back to the valley; as Jesus resumed his journey to the cross. Because the real work is in the valley.

Where we are. Right now. The present. The low places. The daily grind.

We worship a God who has told us we have nothing, nothing to fear. But we forget so easily. We worry, we fret, we twist our hands and we live in fear . . . bemoaning our own powerlessness and forgetting God's power in our lives.

Do not be afraid . . . ? We lose it in the valley. We forget God and build our own useless little idols . . . our golden calves . . . we try to manipulate instead of trusting God.

We become practical atheists. A practical atheist is one who says they believe in God, but lives their lives as if God has no power or makes no difference in the world. To worship God is to trust God above all others. All the time. In all circumstances.

It's so easy to get lost in the valley.

I want to quote Henri Nouwen here:

"How to dispel the passions that make us manipulate instead of worship? Well, the first thing to realize is that you *are* the glory of God. In Genesis you can read: "The Holy One fashioned humankind of dust from the soil. Then God breathed into Adam's nostrils a breath of life, and thus Adam became a human being." (Genesis 2:7. We live because we share God's breath of life, God's glory. The question is not so much, "How to live for the glory of God?" but, "How to live who we are, how to make true our deepest self?"

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With a smile John Eudes said, “Take this is your koan: ‘I am the glory of God.’ Make that thought the center of your meditation so that it slowly becomes not only a thought but a living reality. You are the place where God chose to dwell, you are the *topos tou theou* (God’s place) and the spiritual life is nothing more or less than to allow that space to exist where God can dwell, to create the space where God’s glory can manifest itself. In your meditation you can ask your self, “Where is the glory of God? If the glory of God is not there where I am, where else can it be?” (The Genesee Diary: Report from a Trappist Monastery)

“This is my child, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

And your life will be transfigured.

You have nothing to fear. Ever. Not even death. That’s the message of this table, where we celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection. That’s why it is a joyous celebration of life and hope. Death is not the end. There is nothing so dark – no valley so dire that God’s grace and light can’t lift. All those we’ve loved who have gone before us are here in this thin place that is the table – open your eyes and you can see them, my mother and father and brother, your mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, Rachel is here, and Camilla, Dick Smith, Phil, Alma, Kirk, all your loved ones. That’s why we dance and sing when we come to this table!

Listen to Jesus, and the world will be changed. Listen to Jesus and we can do brave and daring things – things like getting out of bed and facing the day – because we know God’s grace is in us all around us and it is that grace that is changing the world.

Listen to Christ and God’ glory will shine like day on all the darkness of the world.

Listen to the Living Word and live, really live – as the fully human one you were created to be: fearless, faithful, free!

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