

February 11, 2018
Transfiguration Sunday
“Awesome!”
2 Corinthians 4:3-6 ~ Mark 9:2-9

Today we are going to be talking about mountain top experiences ... both literally and figuratively. Mountain top experiences are eye-opening. We learn something about ourselves and others. I experienced an eye-opening experience once when I attended what was billed as an evening of Christian music at a neighboring church in Nekoosa. This was one of those high energy churches that prided themselves on their praise band, so I went to hear them with some other couples from our church. What was supposed to be an evening of Christian music morphed into game night ... and we were roped into playing a version of that old game show classic, the Newlywed Game ... but they called it the oldy-wed game. I couldn't have been more proud when two couples from our church took the stage to compete. These two couples had a combined total of over 80 years of wedded life ... surely, they would crush their opponents.

You remember how the game works don't you? The husbands and wives are taken separately and asked questions on the basis of how they believe their spouse will respond. Well, our couples were off to a great start and I was sure they were going to bring the championship trophy home to Nekoosa UCC. Then came the question, ... “If you could give your wife the gift she would most like to receive, what would it be?” The husband from Christian Life Fellowship said the “gift of God.” The husband from River City Church said, “Praise.” Both husbands from our church answered “jewelry” and they were right! At that point I told everyone within earshot that our team actually attended Bethlehem Lutheran.

But today we are climbing a mountain with Jesus. I've been to a few fine mountain tops in my lifetime. Every summer our family raced to the Colorado Rockies to escape the brutal Texas heat. I loved it there ... not only for the cool weather but for the spiritual boost I never failed to receive. I could sit atop Aspen Mountain for hours at a time and soak up the splendor of God's magnificent creation and the reassurance of God's abiding grace. Those hours transformed my perspective ... they restored my soul.

Mountain tops are important in the Bible, of course. Noah's ark comes to rest on Mt. Ararat, and creation begins again. Moses meets God on Mt. Sinai, and the covenant people of God are formed. Moses sees the promised land he will never enter from across the Jordan on Mt. Nebo. Elijah competes with the Baal prophets at Mt. Carmel. The Disciples pray with Jesus at the mount of Olives. Jesus carries the cross up Mt. Calvary. Yes, mountains are important places in the Bible.

Every spiritual tradition has emphasized “the heights” as places to draw nearer to the Divine presence. The ancients ... Egyptians, Babylonians, Mayans ... even built stair-stepped temples ... artificial mountains they would climb to make sacrifices to their deities. Something about a mountain top makes us feel closer to God. Perhaps it's based on the ancient superstition that heaven was up in the clouds ... so if you climbed towards the skies you would be closer to heaven. Or maybe it's the view ... the godlike vision of the world at your feet. Maybe it's the rarified air ... the oxygen deprivation that leads to visions some might label hallucinations. Or maybe it's the exhaustion you feel by the time you climb to the top.

Of course, we hope to have a “mountain top experience” every time we come to church. We hope to see Christ reveal his glory ... and to feel inspired like Peter, saying, “Lord, it’s good for us to be here!” And like Peter when we get a glimpse of God’s glory we want to hold on to it ... we want to camp out awhile and enjoy the exhilaration, the inspiration, and the reassurance that we don’t feel so often down in the valleys of our everyday experience. We are tempted to recreate the glory, even by artificial means ... which is why I think worship ... in so many places ... has degenerated into hi-tech entertainment extravaganzas ... designed to stir our emotions and manipulate our senses into feeling that we have met God. We substitute emotional excitement for spiritual awe. But you can’t make God appear on demand. You can’t force the glory of the coming of the Lord. It has to be authentic. It either happens or it doesn’t. But it’s always up to God.

So, let us climb this mountain with Jesus and three of his disciples today and see what happens. The disciples have been with Jesus on a long journey already. They have seen his reputation grow. They have seen him heal lepers, cast out demons, preach in the synagogues, teach on the hillsides, and debate with the scribes and Pharisees. They have seen Jesus still the storm and feed the multitude. You would think by now they might have a clue who he is and trust his direction. But no, they are still slow to believe ... hesitant to trust. They must have been as dumb as dirt to miss the point again and again! But ... how long does it take for us to follow him before we catch on and learn ourselves to trust?

Today we walk with Jesus, and Peter, James, and John ... away from the crowd, apart from the others, and climb to the heights ... we aren’t told why. We get to the top and admire the view as we catch our breath. We turn to tell Jesus that the other disciples look like ants down below, but suddenly his appearance is transformed ... “metamorphosized,” Mark tells us. His clothes become a dazzling white. Moses and Elijah, the chief figures of “the law and the prophets” (as the Jews call their scripture) come beside him to confer. Then a cloud overshadows them ... like the cloud which led Israel in the wilderness ... like the cloud that came to end the drought as Elijah foretold. The cloud is a sign of God’s presence in the Hebrew Bible ... of God’s leadership and providence.

We fight again to catch our breath. We feel like ants before the glory of the Most High God. Peter, scared witless, tries to take control of the moment and proposes a building program. He makes some inane remarks instructing Jesus on what we should do ... but then the cloud comes over us and from the cloud the VOICE speaks: “This is my Son, the beloved; listen to him!” It is our usual way. We react to fear with useless hyperactivity. We respond to feeling out of control with empty chatter. We fill our prayers with inane instructions telling Christ what he needs to do for us ... when we should be listening to him ... waiting in silence for him to speak to us. But we can’t hear what God speak to us until we turn off the noise of our environment without ... and the noise of our own demons within ... and get quiet.

What happens on that mountain with Jesus today is not what any of us would expect ... though by now you’d think we would. It is simply AWESOME! I usually avoid using the word “awesome”, because it has been so diluted and degraded in recent years. “How’s your chicken sandwich? “It’s awesome ... and these fries, they’re awesome too.” But, here, only for a few moments ... we see Jesus revealed ... Jesus as he truly is ... Jesus, the beloved Son of God ... in all his glory. That’s truly AWESOME!

The mountain top ... the dazzling clothes ... Moses and Elijah ... the cloud ... the VOICE ... so many symbols here. It makes you wonder ... are we meant to take this story literally, historically ... or figuratively, metaphorically? And in either case, are we to understand that Jesus changes before their eyes or is it that their eyes are finally opened so they see him as he has always been? Surely, they will never look at him the same way after this. Surely, they will begin listening to Jesus with a new concentration. Read the chapters in Mark which follow. Soon Jesus will teach them with a new urgency about service and sacrifice ... and the willingness to suffer for the sake of others. Soon Peter will be the very first to confess that Jesus is the Messiah that we've all been waiting for. I wonder if they don't begin to see the same glory more often in the valley ... that they witnessed this day on the mountain top ... not because he has changed ... but because their eyes have been opened to see what has been there in plain sight all along. Yes, mountain top experiences are often life changing.

But what I want to say today is that the glory God is not just with us on those mountain tops, or in ecstatic moments of worship ... but also on ordinary Sundays and even gloomy Mondays when we are down in the everyday valleys of life. The same Jesus who is with us when we feel high and exhilarated in a moment of inspired worship ... is with us in our journey every day, leading us, helping us, surrounding us, calling us. Jesus doesn't change. It is we who lack vision to see him. It is we who are too noisy to hear him.

I believe the evidence is all around if we'll just open our eyes to see. The glory and goodness of God are not always hard to find. We would see more if we would only look. So, look! Because even in your most unguarded moments, you may suddenly be surprised by grace. Even in the hardest struggles ... the transforming Christ may suddenly be revealed ... and something happens if you are paying attention. What is that? That's AWESOME!

When I was in seminary, my friend Donte lead "prayers for healing from violence" in Chicago every week. One week he led a prayer vigil for a twenty-three-year old man gunned down at fifty-third and Woodlawn ... two blocks from our seminary. The father, a Black pastor, tried to say something to the fifty plus people gathered, but all he could get out was "I loved my son so much." There was this long silence ... finally interrupted by a blue-collar white guy whose son was killed last year. "C'mere Dad," he said as he embraced the grieving father in a huge hug as they wept together. I saw my friend Donte the next day and told him how moved I had been by such great love expressed through such intolerable pain. He told me that after everyone else had left, the grieving Dad was standing in the street where they found his son. Donte had the processional cross in his hand ... a three-foot wooden cross they used in the service. The father told him "up here's where his head was, and his body stretched out that way." They stood there for a minute in silence, and then Donte was inspired to lay the cross down in the street where the son's body had lain. The dad bent down and began to stroke the arms and trunk of the cross as if it were his son. After a few minutes he picked up the cross, handed it to Donte, said, "I love you" and walked away. What is that? That's AWESOME!

You see what I mean? Not just on the mountain top. Not just in our happy days. Not just in our exuberant triumphal worship. But also, in our sorrows. In our hardest struggles. In our deepest losses. The glory of the Lord is with us. The grace of Christ guides us. The love of God sustains us. And what we experience in those moments can only be described by one word. What is that? That's AWESOME!

May we pray?

Jesus, Savior, Sovereign, You are always awesome. But we live with our eyes to the ground, our ears filled with noise, our mouths yammering away with our fearful and foolish plans. We miss so many signs of your glory. We do not even see the beauty and majesty you have planted in the people around us or we would have no trouble loving them. We do not see the glory and the power of your presence or we would have no trouble trusting you. Open our eyes. Unstop our ears. Teach us to live everyday by the vision we have from you in those rare mountain top moments. And we will embrace the way of your cross in the name of your love, in the name of Jesus, the Christ. Amen.