

This morning I am going to read our scripture passage from Eugene Peterson's "The Message". This is a two part story which follows Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah. Both parts are quite stirring, filled with drama and I like how Peterson captures that sense. Mark 9: 2-9 and 14-27 This is the Word of the Lord...thanks be to God. God open our hearts and minds that we might see Jesus afresh this morning by entering with him into these events in His life...for our joy and your kingdom work in our lives.

The setting for the first scene takes place on the Mount of Transfiguration. It is believed to be Mount Tabor. Mountains are named many times as places of significant events. No wonder! Mountains are wondrous and great things. They represent strength and solidarity, permanence or at least longevity and if you are defending territory, a great place to be. When you are up on one you get glorious and expansive views. To be on top of the world is a feeling of grandeur and majesty and humility.

I have never climbed up a real mountain, but we traveled one summer years ago in Switzerland which is filled with alpine wonders. Much of our travel was in the Alpine region. Favorite days were days of hiking the mountain paths through pastures with Swiss cows, visiting Heidi-like villages, breathing that thin air. We rode cable cars up steep mountain sides to view the world from above - when the weather was clear, the view was grand. We walked into the glacier that spawns the Rhone River - icy, blue, water gushing out and flowing down the mountain, carrying all kinds of silt and rock and life to the valleys below. I loved that time in Switzerland and would have stayed there roaming the heights much longer than our holiday allowed.

Jesus was well acquainted with mountains too. Whereas our trip to Switzerland was total vacation, meeting relatives we didn't know, eating fondue, riding trains that were on time, and having the experience of our lifetimes, Jesus' trips to mountains were for different reasons. You remember his first trip, escorted by Satan who tested him by showing him all the kingdoms of the world (talk about an expansive view!) and offering the chance for him to rule over it all by simply bowing to him. Then Jesus sometimes escaped the crowds by going up a mountain to pray alone with His Father. And sometimes He took the crowds with him to teach them. (Think The Sermons on the Mount) At other times just his disciples were with him. In today's reading he headed up the mountain with just three of his team, Peter, James and John where he was prepared by his Father for the final journey into Jerusalem - the place of his sacrifice.

There is much to be said about that trip up the Mount of Transfiguration. There his appearance changed dramatically, changed in appearance with brilliant light, two ancient men from the long past appeared with him - Moses the law-giver, and Elijah the prophet. They talked with Him about what was soon to happen in Jerusalem. A cloud covered them and the disciples heard the voice of God, saying almost word for word what He said at Jesus' baptism as Jesus began his earthly ministry- "this is my beloved Son in whom I have delighted, listen to him."

An aside: God the Father gives Jesus His Son these wonderful words of encouragement just before he enters his greatest temptation and battle - "you are mine and you are loved." I ask myself, who in my life needs to hear such words - "you belong and you are loved?" I can think of several - my husband, my children, my grandchildren to start the list. Who in your life is facing crisis or temptation or challenge a child, going back to school, spouse heading into work, neighbor suffering loss? And how can we assure them that they belong and are loved? Much to ponder. Back to the story...

For me many questions arise on this mountain top... why Peter, James and John? Maybe Peter who will be the one who starts the church; maybe James as he will be the first martyr, maybe John because he will write the last chapter of the story - the book of Revelations. Then why the changed appearance? Why these two men from the past? And I am just plain curious - what actually happened to their bodies in the transfiguration? I have no

firm answers for these questions. What we know is that Peter would have liked to stay there on the mountain, capture the intensity of the moment, build huts for all three of the transfigured ones. Life seems to be richer, more intense, more meaningful, more everything on the mountain top. Isn't that what we like to do with our mountain top experiences as well? Capture it somehow and preserve it for all time? That's what smart phones are for, I think.

But what goes up must come down. Isaac Newton actually said that in the 1800's!! He meant it literally, but we recognize that as a truism for life experience as well. So down the mountain the four men travel - Jesus, Peter, James and John. Yes, the mountain top was extravagantly exciting, wonderful, above and beyond what the three disciples could have ever imagined on their way up. But those kinds of spiritual experiences may be rare and not of our own making. They are graces given to us for refreshment, for finding clarity, being empowered, finding our purpose and setting our priorities, taking soul rest.

Now we enter scene two in today's reading - The valley - They had to come down and what happens at the bottom of the mountain is the most important part of this story to me. We too must come back to the life we live day by day after a powerful or exciting mountain top experience. Not back to reality because the mountain top is reality as well. But back to the valley where we encounter the world in its raw brokenness or maybe boring sameness. Jesus is our model here. No matter what the mountain top held for him, he always came down to serve.

So Jesus and his three disciples walk into a crowd of folks eager to see him and with an urgent need. There is a child, the son of a distraught father. From birth this child has been subject to seizures that have been life threatening. One translation identifies it as epilepsy. And it surely sounds like it. The 9 disciples who stayed behind in the valley were not able to help the child or the father.

Whatever hindered the healing, Jesus shows an unusual sign of frustration - with whom, the text is unclear. Maybe he was frustrated because once again the argument was with the religious leaders. They were blind to who he was and what he was there for. It is pretty easy to get frustrated with people who just don't get you. Ever been in that situation? Perhaps with parents or teachers or friends? Frustrating!! Or maybe he was frustrated with the disciples who couldn't help this child. After all they had been out on village tours where they did heal the sick, blind and lame. Why not this time, this child? Maybe he was frustrated with the father who said, I kind of believe, but I need help! Despite his frustration, Jesus heals the child. I am focused there. His team didn't help, couldn't help; the authorities swiped and griped; the father had hope but without much faith. But Jesus re-entered to serve the rough and tumble of a disappointing, broken world, where he couldn't even depend on his friends to get it right. Have you been there? I have...

Sometimes I am so ready to give up and give in - especially it seems when I have just been to the mountain top!!! Maybe my expectations have been too high expecting that life will be different just because of my mountain top time. Perhaps I haven't accepted the realities of living most of life in the valley while enjoying the occasional high. Whatever the reason, several of my mountain tops have ended with me crashing in the valley. I know I am not the only one - a common and almost expected crash that many experience is the post-Christmas crash. For awhile we live in the hope of peace on Earth, good will to men., at least that's what we sing and say. The tree is festooned, the gifts wrapped and given, happy music plays everywhere non-stop, lights break through the dark winter, Joy everywhere!! And then January arrives, cold, an ice storm, everyone tired and grumpy and broke, no Christmas spirit to coast on emotionally. Down in the valley we find ourselves with a choice to make about how we will live the valley life. Jesus tells us how - despite our disappointment in the people and events around us...get to work serving: Bring the cup of cold water, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, listen to the brokenhearted, bring to our little piece of the world the peace on earth Jesus has given to us. That is the Jesus way.

Jesus invented “what goes up must come down!!” And so we too should practice the downward journey - not avoiding the mountain tops, they are gifts, but refusing to make life about them to the detriment of all that remains to be done in the valley. And attitude is everything.

Paul famously says in Phil. 2:5-8 “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death - even death on a cross.”

Jesus demonstrated the downward journey for his disciples in many ways, especially on the night of his betrayal. In John 13:1-5 “Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love... Jesus knew... that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples feet... “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord and rightly so for that is what I am. Now that I your lord and teacher have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.... Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Notice what is said here: Jesus downward ministry was motivated by his love for them. He knew where he came from and where he was going - His identity as God’s Son was completely certain to Him. These two things - love and his identity as God’s beloved son drove him to serve. Those same two things are our motivation as well - we are loved and we are God’s children with His love in us to give away. Since we are God’s children, we know where we have come from and where we are going. The power to serve is ours through the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the consequence of living the downward journey is blessing.

Have you had a mountain top experience this summer? or lately? or ever? When you came back down what did you find? My guess is you found just what you left behind - the raw, broken world for the boring one that needs the perspective, the purposefulness, the priority that comes on the mountain. Mountain tops are to be cherished and remembered, the valleys are to be welcomed, not just endured, to be embraced as the place of loving and giving and grace. So may it be.

“At the Name of Jesus” is a hymn that captures the downward journey of Jesus. We will sing it to a tune familiar to us “Like a Rive Glorious”. Let’s sing it with praise and thankful hearts that he made that journey for us and ask him to grow such love, humility and grace in us so that we can give it away to our world. Please stand and sing with me...