

Sermon for February 26, 2017
Transfiguration Sunday
"Getting to the Mountaintop"

Exodus 24:12-18
Matthew 17:1-7

A mountaintop is one of the most beautiful places on earth. Maybe it's the panoramic view, and the realization that all that beauty is God's creation. Maybe it's the experience of watching clouds float by at eye level. Maybe it's the thin air. Whatever it is I simply feel close to God on a mountain.

But I have discovered that getting to a mountaintop is difficult. Melissa and I like to go to the mountains. Sometimes if you cannot drive to the top a particular mountain we take to foot. Usually these mountain trails are uphill but smooth at first. However, as we get further and further up, they become steeper and steeper. There are more rocks and roots to stumble over. It becomes more and more difficult to keep a good footing. When we are the most tired the trail gets its roughest and the last 100 yards are as difficult as the whole first mile.

Mountain tops are great, but they are hard to get to. In the same way the high points or mountaintops of our spiritual lives are wonderful. But they are sometimes hard to reach. It seems that we have to go through a lot of trials to get to those times. But in those moments when God's glory is revealed to us, we feel closer to God than other times and we are given a new perspective on the lower points in our lives.

Jesus' disciples knew this truth. It was a rough trip to the mount of transfiguration. Their journey to that mountaintop began when Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ. Jesus had asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter had faithfully responded by saying what was probably already in the hearts of the other disciples. "You are the Christ the Son of the living God." Then Jesus explained to them that the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem to die and on the third day rise. Peter, the one who had spoken first before said, "Never, we won't let it happen." But Jesus spoke back just as sternly, "Get out of my way you devil. That is the way humans think." The disciples probably felt like they had been kicked in the teeth. It was like their best friend had told them that he was dying of an inoperable cancer and only had six months to live. And when they had tried to convince him otherwise he pushed them away.

The account of the Transfiguration begins with the phrase, "Six days later." For six days they carried this news of Jesus' impending death around inside of them. For six days it soaked into their souls. For six days they secretly grieved for the inconceivable death of their Savior. If he was the Messiah how could he die? What would they do without Jesus? For six days they walked in a daze between denial and acceptance of the most unacceptable news they had ever heard.

On the seventh day, Jesus took Peter, James and John, a representative group, up the mountain. And suddenly on the seventh, or "Sabbath" day, the day of God's favor, the glory of God was revealed to them in Christ. His clothes and his face glowed. Heavenly light shown from him. And that wasn't all. Moses and Elijah appeared. The two greatest Prophets of God right there with Jesus. Then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice came from heaven and said, "This is my Beloved Son, with him I am well pleased; listen to him."

Maybe if the disciples could hold these two truths in balance: maybe if they could remember Jesus the Messiah suffering and dying, and Jesus the Son of God high and glorified; maybe that balancing act could help them understand or at least cope with what was happening. Maybe the vision of glory and the voice from heaven could help them deal with the trials of the past; and the future. Maybe it would give them the strength to lead the other disciples in their trials also.

Moses had appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration. Maybe, as the disciples pondered this incident later, they remembered that Moses had been on that mount before. Oh, not that exact pile of rock, but that same situation. Except that time Moses was not part of the vision, he was the disciple. It wasn't easy leading God's people through the desert. They were always complaining and talking behind Moses' back. "Who made Moses King anyway?" "Maybe we should go back to Egypt." "At least we had three square meals there. All we eat here is this manna."

One day God called Moses up to the mountain. And when Moses arrived a cloud covered the mountain. For six days Moses had no vision. Visibility, both physical and spiritual, was zero. The worries of being the leader of a nation of escaped slaves plagued Moses like the waves of frogs and locust that had plagued Egypt. For six days Moses sat in the shadows of the clouds and wondered where God was, and he thought: Maybe it was all just a fluke, a coincidence the plagues and the Red Sea and all. Maybe God hadn't really called him there. Maybe it was all just the product of his conceited imagination.

Then on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, the day of God's favor, the glory of the Lord appeared to him. It was like a glorious fire that made the burning bush seem so small. And the voice of God came out of the cloud. God had been there the whole time. In the cloud no less. And for forty glorious days and nights Moses listened to God's council and basked in God's glory.

Maybe if he could hold on to that vision; maybe if he could remember that almighty glory of God; then he could handle leading that ragtag mob that God loosely called as a nation. Maybe the memory of God's greatness could help him handle the constant complaining of the people. Maybe it would give him the strength to lead them through the desert to the Promised Land.

Life, especially the life of faith, is an uphill journey. There are rocks and pits in the trail and at times it gets steep. As we trudge up the trail we are met with disappointments and doubts. Even though we have confessed Christ as our Lord and Savior, it gets difficult. And we are troubled by doubts and dilemmas. Why does God let innocent children suffer? Why does God allow faithful people to die of cancer or to contract AIDS? Why does God let the suffering of the world touch me? Why does God let me suffer? It's like a kick in the teeth. "Hey, wait a minute Jesus, remember me, I was the one who said you are the Son of Living God, and now you do this. You can't go die on no cross for me, I won't let you."

And we sit and stew in our disappointment. We grieve over a loss that we can't seem to accept. We keep poking the sore spot to see if it is any better. And we doubt. For six long days, or months, or years, or decades, we sit in the darkness of a cloud that overshadows us. And our spiritual vision never goes beyond our hurts and doubts. But in faith we sit where the Lord has called us to be.

But then the seventh comes, the Sabbath day, the day of God's choosing. What then? Then the Glory of the Lord is revealed. On the Sabbath day Jesus stands transfigured, glowing with a heavenly radiance, right before our eyes. On the Sabbath day the voice of God speaks out of the cloud itself. I don't know where you are. Perhaps you are in a valley or in darkness. Or maybe you are going up a mountain, or coming down the mountain. Wherever you are remember that God's people have been there before. And when the time was right, when God decided the time was right; the glory of the Lord enveloped them.

Remember that. When the trail gets steep remember that God's glory is always revealed at the right time. Hold on to the glory that you have seen and the promise of the glory that you will see. Balance it with the truth that the trials of the past have shown you. And let it prepare you for the desert places and trials ahead. If you can hold on to that glory and the voice, it will enable you to face the memories of the past and the troubles of the future just as Moses and Peter did. The mountain is steep, but remember that God is with you and God's glory will meet you at the top.