
THREE VIEWS OF A MOUNTAIN

A Sunday school class was discussing the events of today's reading from Matthew 17.

- Brandon had not really been paying attention, so when Mrs. Petersen asked him, "Where was JESUS in this story?" he answered, "Uh...up on a mountain?"
- "And why was HE up there?" she asked.
 - "Uh...HE was doing arithmetic?"
- Surprised, his teacher asked, "What do you mean, 'arithmetic'?"
 - "Well," Brandon replied, "you said that JESUS went up on the mountain, and HE began to figure."

Like Brandon, there are many who are a bit confused about this event that took place on top of that mountain two thousand years ago.

- In the Bible, mountaintops are where significant—even life changing—events happen.
 - It was on the top of Mount Ararat that the ark came to rest after the flood.
 - It was on a mountain that Abraham's faith was tested as he was asked to sacrifice his only son, Isaac.
 - It was on a mountain that Moses encountered the burning bush and received the call of GOD to seek the freedom of the children of Israel from their slavery,
 - and later, as we heard in the first reading today, that Moses received the stone tablets containing GOD'S law.
 - The Promised Land was first viewed by the Israelites from a mountaintop.
 - JESUS preached His most significant sermon—portions of which we have heard the past three weeks—from the top of a mountain.
 - The crucifixion took place on a mountain.
 - The ascension occurred from a mountaintop.
 - And today's gospel reminds us that JESUS was transfigured on a mountaintop.
- I think we can learn a lot about faith and discipleship by considering the mountaintop experience, both through the transfiguration, and as we look at our own lives.
 - Let's look at the mountain from three different views.

First, throughout most of our lives, we stand at the bottom of mountains and look up.

- Perhaps you've actually looked up at mountains and pondered if something special was up there.
- Perhaps you've been invited to a mountain retreat or a camping event, and wondered if something holy might happen during it.
 - But for one reason or another, you didn't or couldn't go.
 - Maybe you didn't feel you were worthy of going.
 - Maybe you feared the uncertainty of how you might be changed.
 - Maybe it was the inconvenience of making such a trip.
 - Or maybe there were too many other things that pulled your focus away from that mountaintop and the possibilities of what could happen there.

We spend much of our lives claiming that we want the power of GOD in our lives, and even hope or pray to be in the presence of GOD,

- but in reality, we actually spend a good portion of our lives avoiding the top of the mountain.

Consider our worship service this morning.

- Was it hard to pull yourself out of bed to get ready for church?
 - Did the comfort of a nice warm bed or the prospect of a relaxing day at home almost keep you from climbing the mountain to GOD'S house?
- Now certainly you can argue that the typical Sunday morning worship service doesn't compare with a burning bush or a transfiguration.
 - How sad it would be, though, if the occasion where GOD speaks to you or to the congregation through this time of worshiping GOD is the time you chose not to be here.
- Even when we do come to this place, or spend time in GOD'S word, or in prayer,...how often do we allow other things to keep us from the focusing on the mountaintop and receiving what GOD has to offer?
 - We cannot allow outside distractions, lack of attention, or our own critical nature to keep us from reaching the mountain top.
 - Nor can we let the excuse of unworthiness keep our eyes from being opened to the wonder and power of what GOD chooses and promises to offer.
 - After all, those two arguing brothers and the one who would later deny that he even knew JESUS, made the climb and they witnessed the Transfiguration of our LORD.

Consider, though, the second view and what they discovered once they reached the mountaintop:

- Peter and James and John saw the glory of the LORD.
 - More than that, they received three instructions that changed them, and that have the possibility to changes us, especially in our world today:
 - "Listen to HIM!" "Be raised up!" "Do not be afraid!"

As crazy as our world may seem today, more than ever we need to hear what JESUS is saying to us.

- The first command is this: "This is MY SON, whom I love; with HIM I am well pleased. Listen to HIM!"
- With all the "fake news" and "alternative facts" wouldn't it be nice to have a voice we can trust and rely upon to give us the truth and the direction we need?
 - That voice is the ONE we hear each week when we gather to listen to and reflect upon the word of GOD.

Certainly, we may disagree on the meaning of what we hear.

- Nevertheless, we can all agree that the best way to understand GOD is to look to JESUS and listen to HIM.
- To pay attention to what JESUS says and does, to whom HE reaches out, to notice who it is HE gives HIS attention and help *can* be the truth we need in the midst of the conflicting messages and actions of others today.
 - Yes, we may not always agree, but we might also confess that if we all keep trying to listen to JESUS, and do it together, we will be drawn closer to what JESUS intends for us.

The second command comes from JESUS, who says, "Get up," except it's not just "get up" as it is translated here.

- It is the same word the angels declare to the women at the empty tomb: "HE is not here; HE has been raised!"
 - So really it is, "Be raised up!" or even "Be resurrected!"

In the communion liturgy each week we hear the invitation to “Lift up your hearts.”

- In spite of what may be happening out there, in spite of what might be happening in your family or in your own life,
 - the LORD who regards you with incredible love and endless grace has given HIS life for you that you might receive HIM, and be changed by HIM, and become more like HIM.
 - So lift up you hearts! Be raised up! Become more and more the person GOD has again resurrected you to be!
 - Claim the power to act, and the possibility to make difference, and the hope that comes with being about the works of mercy and love to which GOD calls us.
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And the third command is a familiar one: “Do not be afraid!”

This is what’s behind the entire message of scripture:

- that the fears we experience: the threat of terrorism, the possibility of an unstable economy, the confusion over national identity and values, the uncertainty of a better future for our children, and the list goes on and on;
- that to all these different fears, GOD’S reply is the same past, present, and future: “Do not be afraid!”

This is not the same as saying that we will have no problems, or that we will avoid all harm and hardship.

- Rather, it is recognizing that, when we trust GOD for our individual and communal good, and believe that GOD is always with us and for us, we need not fear.
 - GOD did not create us for death, but for resurrection, so GOD does not want us to live with fear, but to move forward—even and especially in uncertain times—with courage and with confidence, not in ourselves or others in the world, but in GOD alone.
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And that leads to the third view of the mountain—the one going back down.

- When we come to the mountaintop, we are changed—resurrected through word and sacrament—to be more and more who GOD created us to be.
- Once we have been changed, though, we must go back:
 - back down the mountain, back down into the valley, to share what we have seen and heard and become.
 - Peter came to understand that, and this is why we have his witness in the second lesson today.
- We, too, have been to the mountaintop and have seen and heard what GOD is doing.
 - Like Peter, we also need to tell.
 - And we can do that because the SON OF MAN—JESUS—has been raised from the dead.

But you also need to recognize that, though you have been changed, the valley is the same.

- Many of those you will encounter have not been to the mountaintop and have not seen and heard and may not believe.
 - That doesn’t mean, however, that we stop speaking and acting and bringing the good news.

We have been to the mountaintop and now it’s time to return to the valley to share what we have seen and become.

- So, listen to HIM! Be raised up! And do not be afraid!