

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, February 7, 2016
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Exodus 34:29-35; Psalm 99; Luke 9:38-43
“From the Mountaintop”

In many cultures and traditions, mountains are thought of as sacred places. Because they are the highest places on earth and closest from the sky, they thought to be the closest place from God. People in history have built altars and temples on the mountains, prayed and even lived there. And there are many stories of people having special mountaintop experiences of encountering God. The Bible is filled with these stories as well: Noah’s ark rested on Mount Ararat after the flood and Noah saw God’s covenant through a rainbow; Abraham was called to go up on Mount Moriah to sacrifice his son and met God’s angel who stopped him; Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai; Mount Zion was where the first temple was built; and on Mount Carmel Elijah called God to light a sacrifice in order to prove to the prophets of Baal the Yahweh is the one true God. And Jesus often went up the mountain to pray, sometimes on his own and sometimes with a few of his disciples.

Nowadays, we don’t get to go to a mountaintop very often, and we certainly do not go to a mountain to pray or worship God on a regular basis. But God still speaks to us and gives us “mountaintop experiences” through which we see a glimpse of God’s glory, and receive revelation and enlightenment. They are moments when we meet God.

I am very lucky that I have a mountaintop experience that was on an actual mountaintop. It was about five years ago. A group of my friends and I travelled to a country where people did not have freedom or enough food. Because we were tourists, we were taken to only the most beautiful places in that country, which included the highest mountain. It is 9,000 feet high, and of course we didn’t hike, a bus took us right up to the peak.

Although it was very easy to get to the mountaintop, there was a challenge that was waiting for us right at the peak. From the mountaintop I was able to look down to the beautiful scenery, and to a crater lake that was on top of the mountain. The challenge was to go down to this beautiful lake. There was a cable car that would take us right to the lake in a matter of a few minutes, but the cable car was out of service that day. So we had to go down 1,300 steps! It took our group more than half an hour just to get down to the lake and the entire time I was walking down, I was thinking “Oh my, how am I going to possible make my way back up?”

But once I got to the bottom, and walked as close as I can to the lake, I knew it was worth it. All my worries about making my way back was gone. The lake so wide and open, I felt like I can finally breathe. This lake that looked too big to be contained was gently wrapped and surrounded by the mountain peaks. The bible passage that came right to my mind was “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” (Eph 3:18) I felt like I was seeing God’s huge loving arms surrounding this lake, surrounding this whole nation - this nation filled with oppression and poverty. My heart that had been so burdened by the miserable condition of that country was surprised by hope. God showed me the unending love and covenant God has with the people of that nation, and planted a seed of hope in my heart.

After this mountaintop experience, nothing seemed to have changed. I turned back and there were still 1,300 steps waiting for me. And when I made it back up to the mountaintop and looked down, I knew that the country was still filled with people crying out in pain, crying out for deliverance. But there was a change in my heart. It felt different from that point on. It felt different because I knew that God's covenant and love, and God's pain and sorrow for that land were so much greater than my own compassion. It was no longer about what I felt, but what God felt and his great plans that I could not possibly comprehend.

As much as my mountaintop experience was set apart from my everyday experience, it wasn't all that detached from it. It was there in order to illumine and change my everyday life.

Perhaps that is the reason why Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell the story of a boy in need of healing just after the story of the transfiguration. The stories of the glorious transfiguration at the mountaintop and the world in need of healing and deliverance down the mountain go together.

When Jesus took three of his disciples - Peter, James and John - up the mountain to pray, they witnessed Jesus transfigure. His face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. They saw Moses and Elijah appear and talk to Jesus. And as Moses and Elijah were leaving, Peter wanted to capture and hold onto this moment. He said "No, stay here, don't go. I'll make three dwellings, one for each of you." And the Bible says he didn't know what he was saying. It was a very natural response given that Peter was probably half-asleep, and that he had a tendency to speak or act before he thinks, and also because he was thinking about the Jewish tradition of the Feast of Tabernacles, when people build tents and live in it during the feast in order to remember God's deliverance out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

So he was saying this out of a very good intention, but God interrupted him saying "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" I can almost hear God saying "Just be quiet for one moment and listen to him. Don't you see? This is my son. He's got a lot of greater ideas and things to say than you do! And you're not getting the point. If you listen, you would get what my son is trying to do here!"

If Peter had listened, he would have known that this glorious moment was not completely disconnected to their journey ahead. If he would have listened to what Jesus was talking about with Moses and Elijah, he would have realized that they were not talking about heavenly things in heaven, but about heavenly things on earth.

It says on the NRSV translation that the three of them were speaking of Jesus' "departure." The Greek word for "departure" is "exodus," as in Exodus from Egypt. It has several meanings which gives this text multiple layers of meaning. It means "exit or departure", as well as "the close of one's career, one's final fate" and it can also mean "departure from life, decease." So they are speaking of Jesus departure from earth, his departure from life, his way of closing his career before the resurrection. And it is also making a reference to the Exodus in the Old Testament. And as the Exodus in the Old Testament has brought deliverance of God's people, this new exodus brought by Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection will deliver all people.

In this glorious moment where Jesus was transformed into his future glorious image, he was talking about the most earthly journey his human body, mind, emotion, and soul will walk on. It was a heavenly moment in preparation of the earthly moment of suffering, death and resurrection; A mountaintop experience of glory, which will be followed by his experience of praying in agony at the foot of Mount Olives, his death on the hill of Golgotha, and finally, his glorious ascension on Mount Olives.

So unlike Peter's suggestion, Jesus, Peter, John and James went down from the mountain. And as soon as they went down, the suffering world faced them. At this point in their discipleship, the disciples are not very capable – they had failed to understand Jesus' message about his suffering, death and resurrection, and this time, the disciples failed to heal the boy. But Jesus healed the boy seized by a shrieking, stubborn demon and everyone is astounded. They saw a glimpse of glory and power. It was a mountaintop experience down in the valley where darkness had seemed to prevail.

It wasn't that something spiritual and heavenly happened only up on the mountaintop, but the spiritual work continued down the mountain. And if we can hold the spiritual and material together in our minds, it can transform our lives and the way we perceive the world. It is not just up on the mountaintops, but down here in the lived experience of the valley or the lowly plain, or in the workplace, at home, at school, we can see glimpse of God's glory and power.

In fact, our rare and glorious mountaintop experiences are there in order to change our everyday life. In the case of Jesus' transfiguration, perhaps God allowed Peter, James and John to see it so that they may know who Jesus is while they follow him to Jerusalem, or so that they may hold onto their faith after Jesus' death. In my case, God gave me that mountaintop experience to show God's love for his people, so that I do not pray with my own heart of compassion, but with the hope that comes from God's love and God's unending covenant.

And whether we call it a great mountaintop experience or not, we can glimpse God's glory and love around us. It may be through the dedication of people in places they are called to, or through kindness and love people exchange. It may be through a new birth of a baby, or through a refugee family that comes to start a new life and all those who are supporting them. And I know we will see a glimpse of God's glory as we reflect on all the work God has done through New St James in our annual meeting!

For all mountaintop experiences we have had, and for all the glimpses of light we will see, whether on mountaintops or lowly plains, glory be to God. Amen.