

BACK FROM THE MOUNTAIN

March 2, 2014

Matthew 17:1-9

Our gospel reading for today is the very familiar passage in which Jesus takes Peter, James and John up onto a mountain where he is transfigured before them.

The Transfiguration scene is yet another step along the way in the process of revealing just who Jesus is, which is a major theme in Matthew's gospel.

We know from our study of the gospels that the disciples had lots of questions about Jesus. We know that they asked him some of them directly, but no doubt there were many others that they discussed among themselves.

Jesus was always in conscious contact with God, and when he prayed in a focused way, he most likely experienced God's presence in such an overwhelming way that it had an effect on his surroundings, as well as himself.

Perhaps, that is why he would withdraw from his disciples to pray alone.

But, this time, this one time was different. Jesus understood that the disciples needed something concrete, something that would give them some confidence that they were backing the right horse, so to speak.

So he takes Peter, James and John, who were apparently the "big 3" of the disciples, with him to the top of a mountain, and he lets them observe something really special.

Jesus seemed rather unaffected by the whole experience. Once it was over, he returned to "normal," without much fuss or notice.

It was the disciples and their reaction to this spectacular event that Matthew concentrates on. He is teaching something here about prayer and about perseverance.

Perseverance first. The disciples needed this experience to both teach them about Jesus' goal and to affirm them in their own resolve to stick to the program until they themselves arrived at the goal. That would mean a lot of suffering in the meantime.

This glimpse of glory was to be revisited in their minds when things got rough and tough to remind and strengthen them to persevere until the end.

It was a great gift and explains why, despite their lapses into confusion, into a this-worldly perspective, such as arguments over who is the greatest, fleeing at the arrest of Jesus, etc., they did recoup, recover, and remain faithful after all.

Prayer. The disciples had a religious experience, a mystical experience, an experience of wonder. The scene and its aftermath teach that moments of ecstatic union with the Lord are meant to be just that, moments, not abiding experiences.

We know that we cannot stay on an emotional high all the time, and we cannot base our Christian commitment solely on “feelings.” And I think this is especially relevant to our prayer lives. We must learn to pray as Jesus did. Yes, you may have times when you feel especially close to God, “in the spirit” as some say. It’s easy to pray then.

But there will also be those times when you may feel that God is a million miles away. At those times it is vitally important to remember that God hasn’t moved and to persist in prayer. We must constantly remind ourselves of the invisible presence of God, when we do not feel his presence or any of the effects of his presence.

Many people who don’t feel God’s presence in a particular church use that lack of feeling as an excuse not to go to church. But, we always have his word. God remains in his word and we are to listen even when we are not on the mountain.

That will sustain us, cause us to persevere. God’s presence and power do not depend on our “feeling” it, only recalling it and listening to it. That form of presence does not require any mountain setting, appearances of Old Testament stars or New Testament saints.

Another excuse we use is that we are waiting on the Lord to show us what to do, some kind of cosmic revelation, as it were. The truth is, God has shown us time and time again what to do, has told us what to do, in his word, through the life and ministry of Jesus.

The next moves are ours. It is a serious mistake to say that we don’t have a word from God, and use that as an excuse not to live the gospel.

Back to the scripture text for a moment. So often, many people take a passage of scripture and want to argue and debate – in this case, was it a real mountain, where was it located. Was it Mt. Tabor, Mt. Herman, Mt. Carmel?

But that completely misses the point. Whatever, wherever this place was, it has metaphorical significance as a place of revelation. Jesus was somehow transformed, transfigured – his physical appearance changed, at least in the minds of Peter, James and John.

“His face shone like the sun,” his garments became white as light.” Again, notice the symbolism here. Recall that this was very similar to the way Moses looked when he came down from Mt. Sinai.

And, in fact, Moses appeared on the scene, and so did Elijah. Moses representing the Law, and Elijah the prophets – that is, the Old Testament.

As they fade from the scene, “pale by comparison,” Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets by surpassing them.

In conversing with them, Jesus shows that he understands the Old Testament, and that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.

Great symbolism that would have had meaning for Peter, James and John – because they understood that both Moses and Elijah had conversed with and received revelation from God on Mt. Sinai. Both had been taken up into heaven, transported and transformed, in a mysterious way. Both were expected to return at the end times.

And by involving these two key players, and Jesus “outshining” them as it were, God was revealing the overriding significance and importance of Jesus and his ministry. Never again would Peter, James and John look at Jesus in the same way. We need to understand that as well.

But the three tents. No one has ever been able to explain fully what that means.

Virtually every commentator observes how these proposed tents are a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles during which people would live in temporary tents as a reminder of Israel’s desert wanderings.

While this might shed some light on the context of the remark, it does little to explain the remark itself.

But if we look at it in a broader context, we begin to see the significance. Earlier, in Matthew 16:16, Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one. Right after that Jesus told him and the disciples that his mission would involve suffering and death.

Peter objected to such a thing and Jesus reprimands him for it. Clearly, Peter did not like to even think of suffering or “crosses.”

His statement here might well mean something like, “Let’s stay here, in this moment of awe and ecstasy, but if we cannot, let’s at least erect a memorial, a shrine, a monument for our memory so we can return to it in the hopes of repeating it.” Peter did not want to go down the mountain and return to the molehill of ordinary experience where suffering and cross take place.

I think the same is true for so many people today. We want to use religion, our faith, for very selfish reasons - as an escape, a retreat, a way to “get away from it all.”

But “there ain’t no mountain high enough” as the song says to take us away from the mandate of the Gospel of Jesus, which is to be where there is need, where people are hurting, where people desperately need to hear the good news of a God who loves them and a Savior who has made provision for them.

We can, and should, have our high, private moments with God. But they should not be ends in themselves, but rather preparation for mission and ministry in the ways God has equipped us to do that.

Notice that in verse six, Peter, James and John fell prostrate and were very much afraid.

Prostration was a sign of humility and worship. Fear, both being scared and awed simultaneously, was an appropriate reaction and response to the divine felt presence. The disciples knew who was there. They were having a religious, even mystical, experience.

Although God is completely present always and everywhere, humans experience his presence in varying degrees of intensity. We can't be on the mountaintop all the time, nor should we.

Remember what I said earlier – we must not let the lack of a “super high” or intense feeling keep us from the sense that God is always with us.

If the transfiguration was a singular, once-in-a-lifetime, event, transcendence, which it represents, is not. We have many experiences of transcendence, of being lifted up or going beyond our ordinary perception of reality.

Listening and entering into the spirit of music is a prime example. We listen to music a lot because it raises us up out of the doldrums of routine and tedium, out of the otherwise drab and dreary world we live in and transports us to an alternative “vision” of reality.

We see the ordinary world “transfigured,” into a place we would really like to live. The dirt, dust, grit, grime and gray, the molehill, of daily life can be left and we can go up the mountain.

We can listen to what the music, both the tune and the words, says and enjoy, if only briefly, the exuberance of life that ordinariness can hide. But, at some point, we must come down from the mountain, turn off the music, and return. But, we return having been positively affected by the experience.

For most people, transcendence is but one song away. Like Peter, we want to erect a monument so that we can return to the experience. So, we memorize the song and sing it even when the music is not playing.

That is what we Christians should do - memorize the word(s) of God and practice them in daily life, in our mind we singing the Lord's tunes, behaving as he would.

The “transfiguration” experience was meant to fortify the disciples for suffering and music does the same for us. So does love.

Others may not be able to hear the music but they should certainly be able to see us dancing to it.

Finally, as the disciples lay prostrate, Jesus came and touched them. The human touch of Jesus, like a gentle waking them up, bringing them back to ordinary reality, must have been very comforting.

That's what we need to be open to – the touch of Jesus. He comes to all who receive.

Then, Peter, James and John are told not to tell the vision to anyone. The disciples are not told to forget the vision, only to keep it to themselves.

Having seen a glimpse of what the resurrection means, they can now accept sacrifice, Jesus' and theirs, in that light.

And here, I think is the final lesson for us in all of this. Personal encounters with God, private devotional times, are just that – personal and private. They are not ends in themselves. They are for preparation.

Scripture is full of admonitions that boasting about, even talking about our own spiritual superiority is abhorrent to God.

Be open to mountaintop encounters with God. God will enter your life in ways that may surprise you. But we can't stay up there. God's work is down here, right now.

It may mean getting dirty, or doing something we really don't want to do.

But anytime we start to feel persecuted or put upon, we need to look at the cross and remember that the one we serve, the one we call Lord, went through far more than we are ever likely to face.

And for that, we can only say, Thanks be to God!