

Mountains and Valleys

A sermon taken from Matthew 17, and preached on March 6, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

In life we have happy, positive, amazing experiences. A few weeks ago we reflected on those in the sermon. It is also true that in life we have unhappy, difficult and challenging experiences. If you sat still long enough these would come to mind. We can sometimes think of something that is happy and amazing as a mountain top experience. On the top of a mountain you can see forever, you breathe the clean and clear air, you are fully alive and on top of your game.

And I want to invite you to think about the most difficult and challenging experiences as the valley. In the valley it all rains down on you, or it floods, or you get knocked down and it can be hard to walk up that incline, it can take everything out of you. In sports, there is the phrase "*the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat*". We notice at the end of a game how the camera scans for people in both places, often someone so excited their breath is literally taken away, and then a very sad person, usually in their team's makeup, the "*tears of a clown*" telling the story.

I want us to think about mountains and valleys. Life is a series of mountains and valleys. Life is not a linear progression from the valley to the mountain, there are ups and downs. In the geography of the spirit we find Jesus in mountains and valleys, a close reading of Matthew 17 finds him in both places, and if we are honest we find ourselves, at different time, on the top of a mountain or in a valley, or, in the language of scripture, we are "high and lifted up" or in the "pit".

In the gospel Jesus takes three of the disciples, his inner circle, Peter, James and John to the top of a high mountain, to Mount Tabor, according to the tradition, in the northern Galilee. I have been there. It is a significant distance from the desert floor.

On that journey Jesus is a part of a small group. We are sometimes infatuated with the crowds, but many of the most significant experiences in the Bible happen in small groups, two or three or four people. We often call a small group of people a failure—we say it didn't get traction, there is no market for it, but Jesus intentionally chooses three and up they go, by themselves, to a new and different place. They are on the move. Will Willimon in his book on Jesus says that "*anyone who wants to meet Jesus, to understand or be with Jesus, must be willing to relocate*".

On top of a high mountain something happens. Jesus is transfigured, his face shines like the sun, his clothing is dazzling white. Then Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the greatest prophet, are somehow there. God has shown up. Moses and Elijah are talking with Jesus, time and space have been invaded in some kind of supernatural way. It is a miracle, a spiritual high.

Peter, in what must be translated in some kind of understated way, says **“Lord it is good for us to be here. Let’s build a dwelling place, a tent, to honor the three figures, Jesus, Moses, Elijah.”** And then they are overshadowed by a bright cloud, and they hear the Voice: **“This is my Son, the beloved”**. We have heard these words before, at his baptism in the Jordan River, in Matthew 3. There Jesus was with John, here Jesus is with Moses and Elijah. In each instance there is a powerful note of affirmation and blessing, and in each instance there is the unmistakable singularity of Jesus himself, and here, if we read closely, we see the addition of a phrase: not only **“This is my son, the beloved”, but also, “listen to him.”**

They are overwhelmed and cannot see it all directly. Then Jesus touches them and says **“get up and don’t be afraid”**. They look up, and they see Jesus alone. Matthew is teaching us to turn away from the great and long tradition of the law and prophets and then, to turn our eyes upon Jesus.

It is a mystical experience, a spiritual high for them. They have been standing on holy ground. Maybe you have had an experience of the holy: in a sanctuary, or on a retreat, or listening to a great piece of music, or at a camp, or in a small group of friends, or in a significant life event, the birth of a child perhaps. It is good to name and remember those places of blessing and affirmation, when we knew we also were children of God.

Well, as the story unfolds, they come down from the mountain (verse nine). And, in just a few verses, this small group, that has had such an intense experience, encounters a crowd (verse fourteen). In large groups of people there are great needs and this one is no exception: a boy is having seizures. A man comes to Jesus, kneels before him and says, “I brought him to your students, but they could not help him. Can you cure him?”

We have moved from a spiritual high, where we are receiving, to a place of need, where something will be asked of us, from being filled to being drained. We have gone from the mountain to a valley.

Years ago I was driving along, our older daughter was beside me in the car, it was quiet. It had not been a good week, I cannot remember the details. It had something to do with the stress of school and relationships among middle schoolers. Our daughter was active in the youth group, her faith was in the

process of development, she was trying to make sense of it all. It was the middle of the fall. A few weeks ago the youth had gone on a back to school retreat. We talked about some of it. There was silence. And then she said, "*Dad, you know that retreat I went on a few weeks ago...it is wearing off!*"

The spiritual highs do wear off, we do make our way down the mountain. But there is good news for us: Jesus is present on top of the mountain, in the cloud, the voice, the face shining like the sun, but Jesus is also present in the valley, he is there in the encounter with the man and his son who has a seizure and in his conversations with the disciples about the need for faith, even in the midst of great adversity.

A few weeks ago I preached about Martin Luther King, Jr. We remember Martin, especially his soaring speeches, the "I have a dream" speech, the "I have been to the mountain top" speech. He was a mountain top figure in American history. But King spent time in the valley. One evening he was sitting alone in the parsonage kitchen in Montgomery, Alabama. He had received angry calls and letters that threatened the lives of his family.

He bowed his head over a cup of coffee, and confessed, "Lord, I am weak". And then, in the silence, he recalled the words of the hymn, "*He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone, never to leave me alone.*" And then he would say that heard a voice clearly saying to him: "*Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Martin Luther, stand up for justice. Martin Luther, stand up for truth.*"

God is in the mountain top experiences, in the spiritual highs, but God is in the loneliness and the failure and weakness. God ascends and descends. God is high and lifted up, but God also stoops to our weakness.

The season of Epiphany always ends with the Transfiguration of Jesus, on a mountain, and the Season of Lent, next Sunday, always begins with the temptations of Jesus, in the desert. We worship God, on the mountain top, and sometimes it is a spiritual high. But we also serve God, among the suffering. The mountain top experiences sustain us in the valleys.

The moments of affirmation and blessing remind us of who we are, we are the beloved children of God. On the top of a mountain we can see it all from a clearer perspective. On the top of a mountain we breathe in the fresh air of the spirit. On the top of a mountain we are renewed. Peter is right: it would be great to live on the top of a mountain.

But we follow a Lord who comes down from the mountain, into the valley, who empties himself and becomes a servant. In the valley we identify with those who

through no fault of their own are in despair. In the valley we meet those who lives are overwhelmed with chaos. And some of us, even people who have it mostly together, on the surface, do spend some substantial portion of our lives in the valley ourselves.

So we come to the table this morning, to commune with God, in his glory and in his suffering, to seek his face, to be filled and strengthened. But we know that we cannot stay here. The shadow side of glory is always suffering. Communion with God always leads to cooperation with God. The spirit of the Lord fills us, yes, in order that the same spirit might flow from us.

That is why we come to this place. And that is why we do not stay in this place.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, we give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us. Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Resources: Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King*. United Methodist Hymnal.