

Sermon – March 2, 2014
The View from the Valley

Today's text takes us to the mountaintop. In just a few short verses, we journey with Christ's favored disciples to the top of a high mountain. We glimpse through their eyes Jesus' transfigured body – his clothing and his face glowing white. In just a few short verses, we hear through their ears the affirmation of God the creator – of the Godhead's claim of the Sonship of Christ, and an affirmation of the divinity that lies beneath Jesus' flesh. And we understand through the disciples' minds that Jesus has come in fulfillment of God's promises, as one both set apart from and in agreement with Moses and Elijah – the law and the prophets. Today's text takes us to the mountaintop where we catch a glimpse, through the witness of a few, the radiant glory of God in Christ.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany – the season of light that follows our celebration of Christ's birth. It is a season of revelation, packed with stories that show us who Christ is: both human and the divine. Emmanuel, the God-made-flesh, the fulfillment of the prophets, teacher, healer, Savior of the world... And lectionary writers close this season for us with a culminating passage that shows us once more who Christ is in all his fullness. He IS the light of the world, the one who has come to drive away the darkness in our lives and in this world.

And it's a good thing we get to read this Gospel today. In both Matthew's gospel and in our liturgical year, this passage sends us off on a journey to the cross. On Wednesday, we begin our Lenten journey – a season of repentance and prayer that shifts our attention: toward Jerusalem, toward the

upper room, toward Calvary, toward the tomb. And just as Jesus revealed to some chosen disciples the divinity within before heading to the cross – our view of a radiant Jesus at the top of the mountain gives us a little more courage and a little more hope as we head toward Holy Week.

And so the writer of Matthew's Gospel takes us to the mountaintop so that we might see Jesus in a new light – and so that we might have faith in the face of the cross.

Now while I find the view from the mountaintop compelling, I don't know about you, but I spend most of my time in the valley. Sure, we may have had moments in our lives that have sealed our faith – we may have glimpsed God in the face of a newborn child or in a merciful moment when we have been forgiven. We may have sung songs that never fail to strike a chord in our hearts or spoken a prayer that has been, undeniably, answered. Or we may have heard God's call with clarity and found the direction of our lives transformed. But we do not live our lives on the mountaintop. We are not set apart from the world in a mountaintop retreat, where we can gaze at Christ's radiant glory. We do not get to see the fullness of God up close and personal. Those moments are reserved for mystics and saints – for those whose lives transcend the day to day. For Moses. For a handful of disciples. *For Jesus.*

Most of us spend our days in the valley. We live our lives in the valleys of routine, of responsibility, and even of doubt. We live our lives in the valleys of despair, confusion and hope. We live our lives in the valleys of hard work, struggle, and sometimes suffering.

So while we yearn for a view from the mountaintop, our day-to-day charge is to figure out where God is in the midst of the ins and outs of daily life – when there is work to be done, relationships to nurture, problems to solve, hurdles to overcome.

And yet we gather in worship with a longing to draw near to Christ. We show up every week because *we* want to *see Jesus*. We want to know his direction for our lives. We want to trust that his promises are true. We want to live changed lives, transformed by amazing grace. And we want to participate in God's redemptive work. We want the seeds of new life to be planted with *our* hands. We want to cultivate justice. We want to instill hope. We want to see Christ. But how?

How do we, ordinary, hard-working, hopeful people, catch a glimpse of Jesus in all his fullness? How can *we* grasp who Jesus is and what he is doing in our lives if we don't have our turn on the mountain? Bestselling author, Elizabeth Gilbert writes:

The search for God is a reversal of the normal, mundane worldly order. In the search for God, you revert from what attracts you and swim toward that which is difficult. You abandon your comforting and familiar habits with the hope (the mere hope!) that something greater will be offered you in return for what you've given up.¹

In other words, in order to get to the mountaintop, we have to be willing to make the climb.

¹ Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Eat. Pray. Love*. P 175.

Consider Harriett Tubman. We've all heard her story: Born a slave in Maryland, Tubman escaped to freedom in 1849 through the Underground Railroad. But once she landed in Pennsylvania, she didn't stay put. No, she journeyed to the South 19 more times and led more than 300 slaves to freedom, becoming known as the Moses of the south. What's more: Tubman served the Union Army as a nurse and a spy; she worked with black soldiers to ensure the freedom of slaves not released by their masters; following the Civil War she raised money to construct schools for former slaves. She advocated for women's right to vote, and in 1903 established a shelter for homeless African Americans. Tubman tells of her journey to freedom, saying:

When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven.²

Tubman had been to the mountaintop. But she was willing to make the climb.

So how do we, in our everyday lives, put one foot in front of the other and climb that mountain? How do we swim toward what is difficult in the search for something great?

Mystics and saints and revolutionaries will likely give the same answer: The first step is prayer. Prayer is more than uttering words or reading a script. Prayer is more than asking for what we want or thanking God for what we have.

² Great Quotes from Great Women; p 73.

Prayer is a practice that connects us with God. It is the state of mind and state of heart that allows us to see and hear Jesus. Prayer is showing up to God, and being open to whatever God offers.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Prayer... is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. When I am fully alert to whatever or whoever is right in front of me; when I am electrically aware of the tremendous gift of being alive; when I am able to give myself wholly to the moment I am in, then I am in prayer. Prayer is happening, and it is not necessarily something I am doing. God is happening, and I am lucky enough to know that I am in The Midst.³

Prayer is the practice of tuning our hearts to God. While it can be done anywhere, anytime, prayer takes time. It takes humility. It takes obedient openness. Prayer takes a courageous willingness to see things through God's eyes: *our sins and our possibilities; the world's limitation and expectant promises*. Prayer means emptying out a little more of ourselves: *our egos, our fears, our attachments*; so that there is room for God to fill us up.

Prayer is the journey that allows us to recognize what is already in our midst. Because the good news of our faith is this:

Jesus came down from the mountain. Jesus came right back to the valley with the rest of us. He kept eating and

teaching. He kept healing and forgiving. He kept putting one foot in front of the other all the way to Calvary.

Jesus came to be with us. Jesus did not stay in high places like mountaintops – or even heaven – where glory reigns. Jesus knew that the best way to get through to us – and the best way for us to see him, the fullness of God's love– was to become one of us. Jesus knew that love is best revealed through relationship; that healing comes through solidarity; that hope is born through kept promises; that new life comes only after a death to what once was.

Jesus knew that those of us who made it to the mountaintop couldn't stay there. And he knew that some of us might never get there – or get back up there again. He knew that we'd struggle to find the time or the stamina or the directions to the top. So Jesus brought the mountaintop to us.

That's what Jesus is all about, isn't it? And that's what the Transfiguration shows us after all. In Jesus, Heaven comes to earth. In Jesus, God comes to us. And while he paves the path to the mountaintop, Jesus takes the step and comes into the valley with us. Jesus makes the stretch, so that we might know the great deep love of God for us – and for all.

Thanks be to God.

³ Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Altar in The World*. P 178.