

Glory on the Mountain, Ministry in the Valley

Luke 9:28-36
August 6, 2006

I.

Have you noticed how mountains are the settings for important events in the Bible? Big things happened on mountains. Those events often marked turning points in the history of our faith.

Today's reading from Exodus describes how Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. The Old Testament prophets spoke with God on mountains. After his resurrection Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples on a mountain. In our gospel reading today we heard about how Jesus was transfigured on a mountain during his earthly ministry.

When the Bible tells stories about someone going up the mountain, get ready. Something is about to happen. You just know that God is going to do something, or reveal something, or change something in a big way.

But the things that happened on the mountains were not the ends of the stories; they were the beginnings. Moses and the prophets did not go up the mountain to stay. They encountered God when they were there, and when they came back down they were transformed in some way or another.

That's because even though God's glory was on the mountain where he appeared, his ministry is in the valley where we all live. People went up the mountain to receive God's word, and they came down the mountain to serve humanity in the world. When God revealed something on the mountain, it changed things in the valley.

II.

Today's reading from Luke follows that pattern. Each in his own way, Jesus and three disciples went up the mountain to hear God's word. And each in his own way came back down to the valley to fulfill God's will.

Jesus returned to complete his journey to Jerusalem and the cross. He came down the mountain and took his ministry back into the valley to finish his work of teaching and healing, and to fulfill God's purpose for humanity.

Peter, however, did not understand any of this at the time. It was only after the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that he fully grasped the significance of that mountaintop experience. One of his letters, which is our New Testament reading for today, makes clear how important the Holy Spirit is to our ability to truly understand God's Word.

III.

So, let's look at today's lessons in a little more detail. What are the important parts, and how do they speak to us today as Christians? Well, there are two important teachings. One is about ministry, and the other is about the Holy Spirit.

At this point my professors at seminary would say that I am violating a basic rule of preaching. They say that a sermon should cover only one basic theme or idea, and here I am with two. But I think the readings for today compel us to consider both themes. Let me know after the service if you agree with the professors.

The first message from this transfiguration story is that although Jesus and the three disciples walked up a real mountain to hear from God, we climb that mountain spiritually, on our knees,

in prayer, meditation, and reflection. And as Jesus and the disciples came back down the mountain to live out God's plan for humanity and build the church, we as the church are called to get up off our knees and take our faith out into the world where God's people await.

The second important teaching comes from reading the Gospel and New Testament lesson together. It is that we, like Peter, cannot truly understand God's will for us without relying upon the Holy Spirit. Jesus was transfigured by the Father, but we, like Peter, are transformed through the Holy Spirit. That reality links the Holy Spirit to the transfiguration story, and is why today I will cover both our call to ministry, and our call from the Holy Spirit.

IV.

Let's first talk about the transfiguration and ministry. As Christians, we believe Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. During most of his life on earth, however, people only saw his human nature and the divine nature was hidden from our eyes. Outwardly, in terms of his physical appearance, he basically looked like most everybody else.

That all changed on the mountain, and there the three disciples saw Jesus' divine nature. Jesus was no longer of this world, but of the heavenly realms of Moses and Elijah who were with him. The Son of Man was now the Son of God. For a moment the veil was pulled away, and the disciples saw a preview of the glory of the resurrection.

In fact, Luke's Gospel tells us that the subject of that extraordinary conversation with Moses and Elijah was Jesus' departure from the world. They were talking about the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Imagine what they must have said. Were Moses and Elijah there to brief Jesus on the next steps? Was Jesus there to receive reassurance about what he already knew was his destiny? Certainly Jesus did not need middlemen to speak with God. We'll never know on this side of eternity, but we do know that it might have been the most important conference ever to occur on this planet.

And why were Moses and Elijah there? It could have been Abraham and Isaac, or Samuel and David, or any number of other patriarchs of the faith. Why Moses and Elijah? Well, Elijah was the first and the greatest prophet. And Moses was the first and the greatest lawgiver. So, in those two are combined the law and the prophets, which were fulfilled in Jesus. Once again, the disciples saw a preview of what was to come.

Finally, we are told that God spoke from a cloud, and proclaimed his solidarity with Jesus in words similar to those used at Jesus' baptism. In this case, however, it is important to note that God did not speak to Jesus, but rather to the three disciples. God told them "This is my son, listen to him."

God wanted them to know that Jesus was speaking for God, and one more time, the disciples had a preview of things to come.

And what were those things to come? They were the things that God had destined to happen in the valley, the world where we live. One was the end of Jesus' ministry and his sacrifice so that all might be saved. Another was the disciples' work in preaching the Gospel and beginning to build the church so that all might know God's love in community of faith with one another. Still another was the coming of the Holy Spirit so that all might know God's will for us. And it all leads to our call to extend ourselves to all people in the name of Christ.

But does ministry always happen according to plan in our churches in America? These are troubled times for many churches, including Episcopal church. Many of them struggle to figure out what and who they are, and in that struggle the gospel message can be diminished.

This can cause two problems. First, a church that is confused about its identity will be confused about its mission. It can be tempting to stay on the mountain and not come down. We may want to get away from life's difficulties, and sometimes churches encourage that. It can be more comfortable inside the church's doors than it is outside. If a church does not have a clear mission that its people understand, it can become a place of hiding rather than a place of sending.

The second problem is that in many churches the gospel is not clearly preached. A church that does not proclaim the saving word of God will not offer a saving hope to its people. And people who come into church and do not hear about that eternal hope will leave church unchanged and uninspired.

This is important because you don't go to the mountaintop to find the hungry and the needy, or those who suffer or are cast out, or those who barely exist on the margins of life. And you don't go to the mountaintop to find people who were battered, emotionally and physically, by Hurricane Katrina. They all are here, among us now, needing help and looking to us for hope.

That is a very real part of the gospel message today. We can experience glory on the mountain, but we do ministry in the valley. It was important that Jesus and the three disciples went up the mountain to hear God's word, but it also was important that they came back down and were obedient to God's will.

And as we at St. Thomas do the same, as we get up off our knees to leave our spiritual mountaintops and go out into the valley, as we offer ourselves to those in need, we will be doing God's work and we will be blessed.

V.

Let's now talk a little about how the Holy Spirit fits into this picture. We also heard in the Gospel that Peter wanted to build three shelters. Many theologians think this meant that Peter had no idea what was going on, but didn't want it to end, and tried to prolong the moment.

Obviously, however, heavenly beings do not need earthly shelters. If this had happened today, and if Peter had a camera, he probably would have asked Jesus, Moses, and Elijah to stand a little closer together so he could get a picture.

But that image of Peter in the Gospel, before Pentecost, is very different from his image in today's New Testament reading. In the New Testament lesson, which is from an epistle that Peter himself wrote after Jesus' resurrection and after the Holy Spirit rested on the disciples, it is clear that he fully came to understand what had happened.

He said his preaching about Jesus was not based on cleverly devised myths, and he specifically referred to the transfiguration and recognized God's prophetic message in the voice from heaven.

What brought about Peter's transformation? The same thing that transforms us. It is compellingly described in the Book of Acts. For Peter it was the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost. For us, it is life in that same Spirit, given at baptism, lived in truth and based in worship.

Human perception and observation alone are not sufficient for spiritual understanding. Like Peter on the mountain, if we rely on ourselves we see dimly and miss the real meanings. But if we seek God's will through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and if the Holy Spirit goes before us in what we do, then we cannot fail.

VI.

Today's readings embrace a lot of history and no small amount of theology. We beheld Jesus' glory on the mountaintop, and we witnessed his obedience as he descended the mountain to

his destiny. By taking the Gospel and Epistle together we saw how a bumbling Peter was transformed by the Holy Spirit into the rock upon which the church was built.

We are called to apply these lessons in our lives, and to appropriate them to our very selves. As Jesus was transfigured in the flesh, we seek to be transformed in the Spirit.

And at the end of the day, when we look at the ministry before us, one message endures. One unalterable truth tells us how to be faithful, to live in the Spirit, and to care for those around us. One unalterable truth makes possible all that we can ever hope to be or do. It is what God told the disciples, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him."

Those words to the disciples span the centuries to reach us today with the same force and power with which they came out of the cloud. "This is my Son. Listen to him." *Amen.*