

Last Epiphany Transfiguration A Feb. 26, 2017 On the Mountain Top
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Mountain tops have long been thought of as places where a person can experience a strong, palpable, spiritually exhilarating high. While you don't always have to be on a literal mountain top to have such an experience, sometimes that is where it really does happen. My husband and I witnessed hundreds of teenagers experience that feeling the two summers we served as adult supervisors for a parish's annual mission trip. We drove vans full of teens to Baker Mountain in Coalmont, Tennessee where we spent a week participating in a program called (aptly) Mountain Top, or Tennessee Outreach Project for youth and adults. The premise of the program is small groups of teens and adults travel daily to low income or physically limited area residents in need of work like yard maintenance, house maintenance, or sometimes we'd build structures like outbuildings, decks, or ramps for handicapped accessible entries. Every day during a Mountain TOP week, teens and adults wake up to a hearty breakfast, take about an hour for personal Bible study, reflection, and prayer, then groups of teens and adults climb into vans, drive down the mountain to the house they will spend the day working, eat lunch, then return to the top of the mountain where they eat dinner, have some free time, and participate in worship services. For many teens, it just doesn't get any better than this, because that is where they feel closest to God, where they feel they are living the life of Jesus by helping others, forming relationships, and worshipping God in styles they relate to.

On the last night on the mountain, the talk at the worship service is about the importance of going down the mountain and back into the communities, schools, and families the participants all came from. The speaker always talks about how it can be tempting to want to stay on the mountain, where they are feeling close to God, but the whole purpose of the week is the hope that the real transformation isn't a resident's back yard, living room, or deck, but the heart of the person who daily went down and up the mountain, who faced the challenges projects provided, and to reflect on where Christ was in those moments of pouring quick dry cement, meeting strangers, sharing food, and forming relationships. The whole point of Mountain TOP isn't home improvement or teenage friendly worship, it is providing the spiritual formation necessary for living the abundant life Jesus promised by learning to recognize encounters with Christ and is a way of making the Transfiguration of Jesus we heard about in the Gospel reading today a real one.

Today's Gospel is one of those events from the Bible that it can be easy to see only as symbolic and translatable and miss the bigger picture. I'm sure many of us may have heard the interpretation that on the mountain, Jesus shone with light to show he was divine or close to God, and that the presence of Moses and Elijah, two prophets who also had close encounters with God on a mountain, represent the Law and the Prophets, and when God appeared in the cloud of light and spoke God's words that not only were the same as when Jesus was baptized, they are words that point to Jesus being the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, that is why God commanded the disciples to listen to Jesus. Now that is a powerful interpretation, and one we can reflect on for a long time. Perhaps that is part of why Peter wanted to build structures, to hold on to that moment, so it could be studied and understood. It is probably a true interpretation, but may not be all there is to this event.

There is also the terrible fear of the disciples after they heard God's voice. Fear that Jesus acknowledged in the way all those who spoke for God have always responded to the fearful when they encountered the holy. It was the way the angel Gabriel responded to John the Baptist's father, and Jesus' mother. Even before those visits, in the stories of the Old Testament the messengers of God have told those who found themselves in the presence of God and were quite understandably overwhelmed or filled with fear to not be afraid. They are simple words, easy to understand, perhaps harder to live in to, but that is the consistent message from God, the message that never changes, no matter what: do not be afraid.

In the words of Jesus today, we heard he expanded the do not be afraid message to include the words: Get up, which can also be translated as rise. In the original language of Matthew's Gospel, the word translated get up is used at another incredibly significant time in the Gospel: when the angel told the women at the tomb Jesus has been raised. The word has resurrection written all over it. Remember, the Resurrection is not separate from the crucifixion, but mysteriously part of it. So this one word may indicate Jesus isn't just telling his disciples to stand up, he is calling them into that which all the baptized, including you and me, are called and empowered to live: the abundant resurrection life. I wonder if when we hear Jesus say he came to give us life and to give it to us in abundance we mistakenly think Jesus intends to give us more stuff, but I don't believe Jesus was talking about consumerism, maybe he wasn't even talking about us, maybe he was talking about resurrection. Resurrection means we are free to live without fear and filled with hope because we believe part of life in the Body of Christ is about paying attention to and recognizing encounters with the holy. Through these encounters, something incredible is possible, something Isaiah talked about back in Advent, about valleys

being filled in and mountains being made low; holy encounters can have the effect of lifting up that which is low and lowering that which is so high up it seems out of reach. I saw that when teenagers from elite neighborhoods befriended the elderly and poor of Tennessee.

Perhaps those encounters of the holy are what allows us to see God and when we see God that seeing may be what spurs us to have the audacity to challenge the status quo when it denies respect to others, or what gives us the grace to see our own shortcomings and empowers us to change our lives when we need to, or even to remind us it isn't always about us. Perhaps the Transfiguration of Jesus is about a change of focus from our selves only to God.

In the movie about C. S. Lewis called *Shadowlands*, there is a scene where Jack (C.S. Lewis) and his wife Joy were standing on a hill looking at what is called the "Golden Valley", a beautiful place Jack remembered from his childhood. He and his wife Joy had gone there in part because they had learned Joy was dying. As they stood looking at the beauty of the valley, Jack said, "I'm not waiting for anything new to happen. I'm here now; it's enough."

But Joy wouldn't let him have that moment without the other side, and reminded him it wouldn't last. When he asked her not to spoil the moment, she responded, "It doesn't spoil it, it makes it real. I'm going to die and the pain then is part of the happiness now."

In her way, Joy reminded C.S. Lewis of the deep truth of the resurrection, what the whole Transfiguration may have been pointing to: that pain and happiness aren't separate, they are connected. That a life lived as part of the Body of Christ isn't a life lived in isolation from suffering, but sees suffering as part of the whole. This doesn't make life "less" in any way, it somehow makes it richer, deeper. Precisely how this works is never really explained or discovered, not in the Transfiguration, crucifixion, or resurrection and that is okay, because not everything can be explained. Sometimes the best we can do is live, even when we don't understand or like what is happening, because Jesus can be present in any moment, and that is what can make any moment holy.

The encounter on the mountain we call the Transfiguration is also the signal that time is about to change in the Church Year. We are ending our season of Epiphany, the season of shining light and entering the season of Lent, which will begin on Wednesday when we will once again lift our faces to receive a cross of ashes and the reminder of our mortality. That reminder isn't meant to be depressing, but like Joy on the mountain, to remind us of the fullness of life, and to shift our focus

towards God. The season of Lent isn't intended to be a downer forced on a happy congregation by an institutional church, but is instead the opportunity to live corporately as a community marked by fasting, intentional prayer, reflection and formation as these are ways to help us turn our attention toward God and to see God's Presence in a life that doesn't negate painful parts of life, but embraces all of life with the resurrection hope we can encounter on the mountain tops and in the valleys of life. That is why the creators of the Mountain Top program for youth send their participants back down their mountain with the same hope Jesus gave to his disciples, to not be afraid, to face the joys and challenges and setbacks of life, and to learn to recognize the glory of God in all of life. Today that message isn't just for teenagers, it is for all of us who look to Christ.