

Transfiguration Sunday, February 14, 2021.

He Didn't See It Coming

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There is something about mountaintops, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry writes in his book *Love is the Way Holding on to Hope in Troubling Times*, that "cause the jaw to drop and the soul to sing."

This is the thought that came to mind when he was flying from Nairobi to Burundi. Bishop Curry recalls he was reading a book during the flight when another bishop sitting behind him tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I'm sorry to interrupt your reading, but look out the window." When he lifted his eyes from his book, Bishop Curry was greeted by the magnificent sight of Mt. Kilimanjaro's snowy peak. It sent shivers down his spine and gave the bishop pause to reflect on the sheer majesty of mountains rising up from the earth. And made him think it's no wonder the Bible considered mountaintops to be holy places where people can come close to God and God can come close to people.

For example, Moses first encountered God in a burning bush on a mountain when God called him to lead the People of Israel out of Egypt. It was on a mountaintop God gave Moses the Law in the form of the Ten Commandments. Moses wasn't the only prophet to encounter God on a mountaintop. There was the time Elisha hid his face in the crag of a mountain while God passed by and Elisha knew God had come close by the powerful silence all around him. Of course Jesus delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount from a mountain.

It is no coincidence the author of Mark's Gospel puts all three important figures together on a mountaintop this Transfiguration Sunday. Together they remind us and Jesus' three disciples of the holiness of mountaintops.

This kind of holy encounter was known to ancient people around the world. As he gazed at the awesome sight of Mt. Kilimanjaro, our Presiding Bishop recalled the ancient Celtic people believed mountaintops were "thin places" because they were places where the boundaries between heaven and earth were so very thin, they were almost touching. He observed it is from both literal and figurative mountains prophets saw a new heaven and a new earth, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s final speech where he proclaimed he'd been to the mountaintop and witnessed a new and better day, the beloved community.

Bishop Curry also writes in his book that you don't have to travel to a literal mountain to have a mountaintop experience where you come close to God and God comes close to you. They can happen anywhere. But the mountaintop moments that had the most powerful impact on our Presiding Bishop are the ones like he experienced on that plane ride, the ones he didn't see coming.

In his book, Bishop Curry describes two such mountaintop experiences. One was at Kanuga Conference Center, an Episcopal retreat center in North Carolina where people suffering from HIV/AIDS and their families had gathered for a weekend retreat. Bishop Curry met people from all walks of life at that retreat, all genders, ages, nationalities, and socioeconomic status were in attendance because AIDS, like all viruses, does not discriminate. Yet there came a moment during that retreat, when everyone was gathered for worship when, as Bishop Curry writes, "We could feel an energy not our own, the very Spirit of God filling the place. For a moment, all our egos fell away, and with them, our differences. We experienced ourselves as friendly souls, free and whole, and beloved." The memory of this moment gives him hope for our church and our country.

My favorite of the Presiding Bishop's mountaintop moments was one he not only didn't see coming, but he was also invited into by the most unlikely person.

This one happened when he was doing a pastoral visit to a diocese in the southwest that ended with a banquet where he gave the keynote address; after which people were invited to meet him, ask a question, or take a selfie with him. Bishop Curry writes as the line formed one individual stood out from all the excited, happy, enthusiastic majority of folks waiting their turn to meet him. I mean this individual literally stood out, being at least six foot five inches tall. In addition, he was sporting a truly magnificent beard, was dressed differently, and his face was stern and serious. When he got closer, Bishop Curry wasn't too sure what kind of meeting this was going to be. But the man shook his hand and said, "I'm so glad you are my bishop and that you're my brother."

Then he told Bishop Curry his story: both his grandfather and father were members of the Ku Klux Klan. When he left for college, he moved away from the town he grew up in and started attending a different church than he'd been raised in - an Episcopal Church. In the Episcopal Church he was accepted and felt safe enough to tell his story and the people in that parish didn't shame or shun him, they loved him. The man told Bishop Curry the members of that parish taught him about the unconditional love of God, they helped him "find the truth of his faith. They helped him heal."

Before the man left, he and Bishop Curry embraced, and Bishop Curry writes, suddenly they "were on the mountaintop. He took me there. And in turn, his church had taken him there... Their love changed his world and our world with it. Love does that."

Every year on Transfiguration Sunday, the Gospel takes us to the mountaintop where Jesus is seen conversing with two Old Testament prophets so beloved they could be considered heroes of the faith, two Biblical figures who are no strangers to mountaintops and holy encounters with God. Every year we read about Jesus' clothing glowing and the Voice from heaven audible on earth commanding Jesus' awe-struck disciples who obviously didn't see this coming, to listen to Jesus, God's own beloved Son. Most years sermons about this Gospel inform and remind us why Jesus' clothing glowed: as a sign of who he really is. Jesus is the Messiah, he wasn't spewing fake news or living in a fantasy when he talked about God's Kingdom drawing near. He is the real deal. Sermons are also quick to chastise Peter's offer to build structures to hold this mountaintop moment as long as he can to make it last. Every Transfiguration sermon is likely to remind us Jesus didn't stay on the mountaintop; he went down into the real world and that means followers of his must do the same. We can't stay in the glory; we have to return to the real world and follow Jesus all the way to the cross. There is nothing wrong with this message. It's a good reminder for us. But in times like these with overwhelming realities like the pandemic, the revealing of racial injustices, the violent insurrection at our nation's Capital, maybe this year it might be beneficial to pay closer attention to the mountaintop before being too eager to return to what we call "the real world".

Maybe this year we need those mountaintop stories where God came close to someone and someone came close to God. Maybe this year we need the reminder that just because these holy moments are brief and fleeting doesn't mean they aren't transformative. Maybe we need the reminder you don't have to climb an actual mountain in order to come close to God and for God to come close to you, in fact you don't even need to see it coming. You don't have to plan or work to create these moments, you just need to be open to receiving God's love, even if it is from an unexpected source, and willing to give that same love. Maybe this year we need one person's mountaintop moments to remind us of their power, their possibilities, and to awaken memories of our own mountaintop moments when we felt God come close to us and we felt close to God. Not so we can dwell in the past, but to be reminded of how the love of God can and does change the world one moment in one person's life at a time.

Of course we can't live on the mountaintop. But as Bishop Curry writes, "the mountaintop can live in us." Because the mountaintop can live in us, there is hope for us all, hope for that better day, when beloved community is real for all God's children, when forgiveness is practiced with generosity. We who have been to the mountaintop can live in hope because we know the reality of the power of God's love to heal the hurting, to bind the broken, to renew the exhausted, to set free the captive, to create the new heaven and new earth in us, in moments we might not see coming.