

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 7, 2016

"Mountaintop Experience."

Exodus 34:29-35, Luke 9:28-36

Many years ago, by the invitation of the President of Mexico, Mother Teresa opened a home in a very poor section outside Mexico City. The Sisters who visited in the homes of these very poor people were surprised when, despite their poverty, these people did not ask for clothes, medicine or food. They only said, "Sisters talk to us about God."

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The Scriptures have given us many epiphanies during this season. We received God's love letter. We saw the star that lead the Magi to Bethlehem so that they could see and worship the child who was born King of the Jews. Then we had the epiphany of a dove and a voice from heaven, "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Another one was the most difficult commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. We heard the good news of Jesus' fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Last Sunday we had an epiphany about the challenge of loving the Jesus way. And finally today we go up on a mountain to discover Christ in all his glory.

We are told that the occasion of the transfiguration of Christ probably took place on Mount Tabor, which rises to an elevation of 9,166 feet and is located in the area of Caesarea-Philippi. The story begins like this, "About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray..."

You might rightly ask, "Eight days after saying what?" This is most interesting. It was eight days after Simon Peter had his own significant epiphany. Remember, Jesus had asked the disciples who people were saying that he is? And Simon Peter answered, "God's Messiah."

In Luke's telling of the story, Jesus immediately warned them not to tell this to anyone. He said to them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the Elders. He also said, "Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it to gain the whole world, but lose your soul..."

This is a pretty important chapter in the Bible where much is revealed and, in a sense, it's all leading up to this high moment here on this mountain. But let's continue the story: "About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray..."

I believe that it is significant that Christ felt the need from time to time to go off by himself to pray. After all he was the Christ! Surely he was in constant communication with God. His thoughts and God's thoughts were one and the same. And yet, he felt the need for a time of prayer.

Peter Story, an Anglican priest, who served in South Africa, was the Conference preacher at one of the West-Michigan Annual Conference gatherings, told this story. He told about Archbishop Desmond Tutu and their fight together against apartheid many years ago. He said that often those fighting against apartheid would come into Johannesburg and rent a room for the night, where several people would stay. There might be as many as ten of these fighters in a room. One night, Peter Story said he was awakened about 4:00 in the morning by a shuffling sound over in the corner. He looked and saw someone sitting in the corner with a white sheet covering him. It was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, retreating from the world for a few minutes, beginning his day in prayer. And then he said that every month, Tutu would leave the work and go away for two days for a silent retreat.

One day, Reverend Story decided to confront Desmond Tutu: "There are young men and women dying. How could he leave the movement for two days a month? Desmond Tutu answered, "I leave and go on retreat for two days a month, so that I can do the work God has called me to do the other 28 days."

We don't know why Jesus felt the need to go off and spend time in prayer. Maybe it was because his ministry was so draining. Anyone who works with people, meeting their needs, consoling them in times of heartache, helping them find healing in a time of distress, will understand. Jesus was fully human and fully

divine. Human beings need to recharge. We need to spend time with God to renew our sense of God's presence in our lives.

I love something Billy Graham once wrote. "I watched the deck hands on the great liner United States, as they docked that ship in New York Harbor. First they threw out a rope to the men on the dock. Then, inside the boat the great motors went to work and pulled on the great cable. But, oddly enough, the pier wasn't pulled out to the ship; but the ship was pulled snugly up to the pier. "Prayer," says Graham, "is the rope that pulls God and us together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us to God..."

Maybe that's why Christ spent time in prayer. He took time to be in the Father's presence simply as a way of energizing his ministry. As Desmond Tutu put it, "I leave and go on a retreat for two days a month, so that I can do the work God has called me to do the other 28 days."

The story continues: "As Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with him. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment in Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. And as the men were leaving, Peter said to him, 'Master, it is good for us to be here. Let's put up three shelters one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'" Peter didn't know what he was saying.

While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him.'

Here on the Mount of Transfiguration we have the highest epiphany of all. We see Christ in all his glory. We see his appearance changed, both his face and his clothing. And we hear the voice of God. Peter, John and James experienced Christ in all his glory. If there had been any doubt in their minds whatsoever that he was the One who was to come, it would have been gone in a flash after what they experienced on this mountain.

They also saw him in the company of Moses and Elijah. You might remember that Moses and Elijah had their own mountaintop experiences. Moses encountered God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:29-35) and Elijah's experience was on Mount Horeb which was called the mountain of God (1 Kings 19). He had fled the wrath of Queen Jezebel and was feeling sorry for himself so he hid in a cave on Horeb. The writer describes his experience like this: "Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. Then a voice said to him, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" The Scripture doesn't say that Elijah's face shone, but it is clear his life was changed. You can't come into God's presence without something important happening in your life.

One final thing: They heard the voice of God saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him." This is what the disciples needed to know, that Jesus was doing the will of his Father. This is one of the holiest moments in Scripture. This is epiphany at its best. Christ is revealed in all his glory. It's the kind of scene that makes us want to take off our shoes because we are on holy ground. It's the kind of experience that is missing on today's world.

I wonder if it is even possible to talk about an experience of the holiness and majesty of God in today's world? We have reduced the Gospel to a check-up from the neck up. Is it even possible to talk about God's glory, God's majesty, God's holiness? Jesus went off on a mountain with his disciples to pray. And when they returned, they were no longer the same.