

Wesley United Methodist Church

February 15, 2015

“Out of the Ordinary.”

Mark 9:2-13

It starts out ordinary enough. Jesus and his three closest friends, Peter, James, and John, go up on a mountain. Nothing unusual. Jesus often went off from the crowds to pray and rest. All very ordinary.

But from here on, ordinary ends. No sooner do they arrive than Jesus is suddenly “transfigured.” He “glowed.” As the text has it, “his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.” Not only out of the ordinary, but absolutely out of this world, which, of course, is precisely what the story wants to convey.

And if that is not out-of-the ordinary enough, two of faith’s most honored heroes suddenly appear by Jesus’ side. Moses, the great law-giver, and Elijah, the prophet par excellence, the Law and the Prophets, paying respect to Jesus, in whom both are brought together.

This is both literally and figuratively a “mountain-top experience.” No wonder Peter, James, and John are terrified. Of course, a little terror never stopped Peter from speaking up; for lack of any other ideas, he suggests erecting three shrines to commemorate the event! Isn’t that what we do? Some churches look like museums.

A big enough deal so far, but now, a cloud overshadows the mountain. The damp air closes in and all the world slips away into a grayness. Then the voice of God echoes around them saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to him!” Glowing face and clothes, visits from famous figures of the past, hovering clouds and heavenly voices...Wow! It was so extra ordinary that when it was all over, and Jesus, Peter, James, and John were headed back down the mountain, Jesus told them to “tell no one about what they had seen.” That made sense. Who would have believed it anyway? But the three of them believed it. They had been there, and those moments on that mountain would forever mark their lives and change the way they looked at everything. Come to think of it, certain moments have a way of doing that.

I wish everyone could have that experience. Some of our more mature congregation may remember the “Murphy Brown” show. In one of the episodes for some reason Murphy asks the staff about their thoughts and feelings about God. There were different responses from different characters. One was an agnostic, one was a Baptist, and so on. But the response of the character Jim stands out. He said he was a Presbyterian and went to church every Sunday with his wife. He said something on the order of, “I haven’t had any experience of God. I go because it is obvious to me that people who attend are experiencing God, and I am hoping that one day I will too.” Sound familiar? I wonder how many real-life Jims there are in our pews waiting...waiting. Plenty, no doubt.

Experiencing God is no great mystery. After all, life is lived in the valley, not on the mountain top. Things are different between the two. If you read ahead a bit in Mark’s gospel, the contrasts are stark.

On the mountain, we encounter Almighty God; in the valley, there is an encounter with the demonic.

On the mountain we encounter our faith’s heritage; in the valley we encounter those who consider questions of faith as occasions for battle.

On the mountain, God’s calming voice is heard; in the valley, human argument is heard.

On the mountain, disciples are in the mood for worship; in the valley, the disciples are spoiling for a fight.

On the mountain, the glory of God is revealed; in the valley, the power of sin and unbelief is revealed.

We might pray, “O Lord, carry me away to the mountain...” But then we remember the place of our ministry is with those who need help down in the valley.

That being the case, how can we arrange those energizing, even life-changing mountaintop experiences during the course of our journey? The easy answer is that we cannot! Sorry. We wait...just like Jim. If you remember, Peter, James, and John were there with Jesus because they had been invited, there were nine others who were not. I suspect the reason is that some were ready, others were not.

Parents, let me share something that we as parents have experienced. When your children are small, there are some words that you cannot say at the dinner table. As soon as we say words like “cookies, candy, or cake” our kids do not want to eat supper any more. They know what “cookies, candy, and cake” mean, but they do not seem to understand the word “later.” They want the dessert now. Forget the main course. If we let them eat the sweet stuff, we know they will not be interested in the nutritious stuff. They would never have a healthy diet.

A mountaintop experience is like dessert. If that is the extent of our spiritual diet, we will be poorly fed. Our faith will be unhealthy. It will be not much more than a spiritual rabbit's foot. Something that protects us from problems is the glory of the mountaintop.

Do you want to be ready for an invitation to the mountain top? Let me make a few suggestions.

First, make yourself available. Peter, James, and John were invited up the slope because they were already in the company of Jesus. The company of Jesus in the year 2015 is right here – the church. Those who, for whatever reason, choose to be absent from the fellowship will not be ready to respond to the invitation.

Second, learn all you can about your faith tradition. Sunday School, Bible Study, Circles, Book Studies, Worship, service groups, and personal devotions. Get to know one another and find a place where you can serve. The text doesn't tell us how Peter, James, and John recognized Moses and Elijah, but they did, and they knew how important these men were. Had they never heard of them, the moment on the mountain would not have been nearly as special.

Third, listen to Jesus. Only twice in the gospels does God speak – once at Jesus' baptism, and again here. God minces no words. Listen to him. We hear him as we worship. We hear him as we study scripture. We hear him in the voice of other Christians. It is so easy to listen to other voices to the point of drowning Jesus out. Not good. Listen to Jesus.

Fourth, remember where your work is. In the valley. The church is the only institution I know of that exists primarily for the sake of those outside it. If we listen to Jesus, we hear him say again, Go...make disciples."

One final suggestion and this I didn't get from the text, but rather from sanctified speculation grown out of a lifetime of observation. If you would be truly prepared for Christ's invitation to the mountain top, have about you some joyous expectancy. When you come to this holy place from week to week, prayerfully begin your trip through the doors, be ready, not to run into someone you would rather not see, not to sing a hymn you don't know and would rather not learn, not to mumble through a prayer without thought, not to suffer through a sermon thinking that someone misses you. No! Rather come in ready to meet Jesus...in a person, in a song, in a word. The older I get the more I realize that ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING. When the ATTITUDE is right, then the invitation can come and be received with the joy it deserves.

Five suggestions in preparation for a trip to the mountaintop: Make yourself available; learn all you can about your faith tradition; listen to Jesus; remember where your work is; and finally ATTITUDE. Then you will be ready when the experience presents itself.

All this "mountain talk" puts me in mind of Martin Luther King Jr's last sermon. He delivered it April 3, 1968, on the eve of his assassination at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. He concluded his remarks that night:

"I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been on the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked it over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Amen.