

February 14, 2010: Luke 9:28-43  
“Mountain Top Experiences”

A number of years ago now, the humorist and newspaper columnist, Erma Bombeck was asked if she could, how would she live her life differently. She answered this very question in her column after she was diagnosed with polycystic kidney disease. I am sure you remember this as it has made the email rounds many times. As she was facing her own mortality she looked back over her life and with her great wit, this is what she wrote: “If I could live my life over again, I would have waxed the floor less and listened to people more. I would invite friends over for dinner even if the carpet was stained. If I could live my life over again, I’d spend more time listening to my grandfather ramble on and on about his youth. If I could live my life over I would have cried less and laughed less while watching television and cried more and laughed more while watching real life. If I could live my life over again, I would have eaten a lot less cottage cheese and a lot more ice cream. If I could live my life over there would be more I love *you*’s and more I’m *sorry*’s. I would seize every moment, look at it, taste it, savor it and never let it go.”

What Erma Bombeck is getting at in her answer is the extraordinary nature of the ordinary and how often we miss that. In our spiritual life, we so long to see God on the mountain, that we stop paying attention to everyday life moments. Then we are frustrated when we feel as though God is not present. How do we keep at the work of the kingdom when the mountaintop looks so good?

If this resonates at all with you, then you have a little sense of what was happening with the disciples during the transfiguration of Jesus. They were so transfixed with the spectacular that they had

no intention of coming back to the valley where the work of the kingdom was.

Jesus has told His disciples that He is about to die but they do not get it. So Jesus takes Peter and James and John, the inner circle, away from the rest of the disciples to a mountain. What did they expect when they set off with Jesus that afternoon? Jesus was forever making them go places with him that nobody much wanted to go. But this was different. Mountains are good, quiet, restorative places for Sabbath retreat and renewal. The pace had been hectic so they headed for the hills.

But on the mountain everything changes. The disciple’s solitude is intruded upon by the dead. Two great figures of the faith, Moses and Elijah appear before them. There is stunning, spectacular vision and inspired speech and there before them Jesus is transfigured. His face changed and His clothing became sparking white. Moses and Elijah speak to Jesus of his passing, which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem. Jesus is affirmed in His decision to go there.

We, who do so much talking, watch this and fall silent, recipients of revelation. The baptismal voice we first heard in Luke 3, again speaks through the parted curtains of eternity, just in case we missed it the first time. “This is my Son, my chosen, hear Him.”

Peter is so overcome by the moment that he blurts out, “Let’s stay here forever.” He wants to make arrangements to stay there on that mountain. “Lord it is wonderful for us to be here. Let us make three shelters, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

Mountain top places are those places when we just know. We understand. We recognize God. They are whole and complete in themselves: a marriage where the love stays kindled through the years, the birth of children and grandchildren, friends old and new, a job we enjoy doing. All of

these can be moments of revelation. But revelation is a gift not a possession.

Jesus always tells us the same thing. It's time to get going. You have got to trust me Jesus says and we are going to have to go down off this mountain. And so we rise, we go forth back down to the valley where there are sick to be healed, crosses to be borne, broken relationships to be reconciled, snow to be shoveled, pot holes to be filled, budgets to be met; we go back to work. Like Moses and like Jesus, having seen and listened to God, we trudge back down the mountain.

There is a danger in spending too much time on that Mountain. If we stay too long we come to worship the mountain where we met God instead of worshipping God. We want the experience and not the relationship. The relationship after all requires everything of us. It requires total commitment.

If we are honest this morning, we might admit that this is what frustrates us at times, the gap between our momentary but stirring mountaintop visions of the kingdom and the grubby reality of the work of the church in the valley. How do we keep at it?

How do we keep at this kingdom work? God has given us ways to keep at it. God has given us what Wesley called the means of grace; ways to keep our hearts open to God and to his presence. There are practices that require our discipline and intention to keep us open to God. There are two of these I want to talk about this morning and the first one is simply reading a book.

We all have this book. In fact statistics show that most households in the US have two or three. You may find one on the bookshelves or on a coffee table and even a bedside nightstand. Sometimes it is well used and looks like it needs replacing. Sometimes it is covered with dust and has hardly had its spine broken in. We give

them to children at a certain age and encourage them to use it. They are all over churches and in every hotel room. We all have several. This book initially belonged to Israel but it has also belonged to us for a long time. This book is what made Israel stand out among the nations. It is what separated this little nation from her neighbors.

Israel's book was unlike any other book that had existed before, because it contained truths and ideas that were unheard of. For instance, this book said that instead of there being little tribal gods all over the place, there was one God and this God is holy and just and loving and good and that He created all things and that He will redeem all things.

This book, unlike any of the other mythologies or religions of the other peoples, said that human existence is not just an endless cycle of repetition over and over again, but that it is a story. In fact, it is God's story. This book said strange things. It said that God created humans in His own image. The people of Israel knew the words of their book by heart because there were no written documents other than the scrolls.

The Jews never got over their awe about the fact that God had spoken. Paul writes to the church in Rome these words, "What advantage then is there of being a Jew? Much in every way. First of all they have been entrusted with the very words of God." (Romans 3:1-2)

Jesus loved the book. The first time we see Him as a boy in the gospel of Luke, He is in the temple learning from the rabbis and asking questions about the book. He is immersed in it. The last day of His life, when He is hanging from a cross, He recites from Psalm 22.

You know my own passion for studying these ancient words. Through His word, He has taken me to places I never imagined possible and He forever changed

the direction of my life. We read this book in the shadow of the cross. Reading God's book, the bible is one way we are enabled to keep at this kingdom work.

The second and probably the central way of keeping at it for followers of Jesus is the discipline of prayer. We always intend to pray, to stick with it. But let's face it; it's not easy.

Why do we pray? How do we pray? We are not the first to ask. The disciples of Jesus came to Him one day and said, "Lord, teach us to pray." They asked when they saw in Jesus something that was missing from their own lives. They saw the power of prayer in Him. They saw how important prayer was to Him. They saw Him praying.

A noted English missionary, Florence Allshorn said, "There is really only one test of our prayer life. Do we want God?" It's that simple. How much do you want Him?

I remember years ago, when I used to swim on the High Point swim team, a fact which my children really find amazing, but I remember my Coach Vic Saniota pacing up and down in front of us saying coach type things like, "How badly do you want to win?" I remember thinking to myself, "Well, I want to win." He would go on and on saying, "Just how badly do you want it." And I would think I wanted it pretty badly and then Coach would tell us to start swimming whatever the distance was he had planned. One by one at the sound of his whistle, we would dive into the icy High Point City Lake Swimming pool water in five-second increments. I can tell you this. At 6:30am on a summer morning, and after about 10 laps in the 50-meter cold City Lake swimming pool, I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't so sure how badly I wanted it. I wasn't even sure what I wanted anymore. I would even begin to wonder what in the world I was doing there.

How badly do you want a deep relationship with God? Everything, including faith and especially prayer, takes time, regular and disciplined time. Ask any artist. Ask any musician. Ask any athlete. It takes time and discipline. It doesn't come overnight, and the habit and practice of prayer doesn't stay with you unless you stay with it. But it's worth it.

We rather naively assume that totally committing our lives to God ushers in a vital prayer life and ushers out a preoccupation with older habits, resentments and thoughts. We get discouraged when we find out that this doesn't happen and we begin to question our commitment to God wondering if God is still around. It becomes hard to keep at it, to keep following, to keep working. What we forget is that God is in every moment of our day and these practices of reading the book and praying keep us paying attention to the ordinary places and ordinary faces where God is.

I have come to think that it might be easier to settle for occasional encounters with God on the mountaintop than to pay attention His presence in every moment. It might be comforting to some who are unsure of the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit in our own broken lives; it might be comforting or less demanding to tell ourselves that our failures and our lack of awareness are because Jesus is now far away. It might be reassuring when we are weary of dealing with our changing world, or even our unpleasant neighbors, to think that we can worship God and turn our backs on these things; that we can't do much anymore about our lives or the lives of other people except gaze at the sky and pray to some disembodied spirit.

It is convenient to think that Jesus was once alive and now is not. We can remember him fondly and then we are left with nothing more powerful than gold crosses, Christian rock bands and church

committees. With Jesus safely tucked away in heaven, we're off the hook and we no longer have to look for Him in the face of the other.

Jesus came to me this very morning as I am going over what was to be preached, trying to get my head around it. It was early and not many were here but I heard him come up the steps and down the hall. Jesus called my name out, "Pastor." Jesus this morning was a tall black man in need of help. And lest you think I am I have reached Christian perfection, let me share my first thoughts with you. As I heard him call out, I thought, "Oh no, not now! I am getting ready to preach the word of God. Please let him find Steve." I didn't even think of safety issues I was so irritated by the interruption.

Then I heard God say through this stranger, "Follow me into the valley and God said, "This is my son, my chosen, listen to Him." I got him bag of food, took him over to Jarrett Hall, invited him to share our food with us there and invited his family to join us in worship. He did not come. But I don't really think he came this morning to fill his needs, he came and God used him to wake me.

Jesus still breathes on us. Jesus knew we would have difficulty coming down off that mountain. He knew we would struggle to keep at it. We are to pay attention and in the grubby details, we find the meaning. The book tells us this.

All of the gospel writers follow the story of the transfiguration with the story of a boy who is desperately ill, so sick that the disciples hadn't been able to cure him. They seem to be telling us that the two go together: the mountaintop experience and the shrieking stubborn demon.

That's the way it happens. N. T. Wright says the more open we are to God, the more we seem to be open to the pain of the world. We are right to be wary when we

return from some great worship service or when we rise from a time of prayer in which God has seemed close and His love real and powerful. These holy moments are never given for their own sake, but so that as we are equipped by them, God can use us within His needy world.

The disciples were overwhelmed by the transfiguration and they could not understand that the glory they had glimpsed on that mountain, the glory of God's chosen son, would finally be unveiled on a very different hill, an ugly little hill outside Jerusalem.

We too find it completely bewildering to know how to understand all that God is doing and saying in our lives. We too struggle to see God's face in every person we meet. But the word that comes to us, leading us on to follow Jesus even when we haven't a clue what's going on, is the word that came from a cloud on that strange day in Galilee: This is my Son, my Chosen one. Listen to Him." We hear those words ringing from the pages of the book encouraging us and that my friends, is how we keep at it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...AMEN.