

Sermon
Transfiguration Year C
August 12, 2007
by the Rev. Norman Bray

What a magnificent scene, Jesus, Moses, and Elijah standing together on that mountaintop, Jesus in shining white and all three of them glowing brightly, the gospel writer says they “appeared in glory.” That was the “Glory of God” that caused them to shine and in the Old Testament that was all of God that humans were ever allowed to see and even that was too much. In the Old Testament reading Moses had to put a veil over his face because that shining, that glory, was too much for the Israelites. They could not stand to see that much of God so Moses had to hide his face from them and you don’t hear Moses complaining about doing this because he understood how difficult it is for us to behold the “Glory of God.” It was tough on the apostles as well, they did not know what to do or what to say when they saw Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in glory and so Peter says lets build some places of worship right here which always sounded to me like a reasonable response to this unusual situation but if that is our response then we are not seeing the whole picture. The conversation that is going on between Jesus and the prophets is about what is coming when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, what is coming when they come down from the mountain, because nobody gets to stay on top of the mountain. Peter wanted to keep Jesus on top of that mountain but Jesus had work to do down at the bottom of the mountain, down where people live and staying on top of the mountain was never an option.

We have all heard about “mountaintop experiences”, some of us may have even experienced them, but just like in the gospels, the mountaintop is not for everyone. Some of us are people of the plateau, not too high up and not too far down, and that is fine, there is nothing wrong with that. God calls each of us in different ways and for some people the cost of the mountaintop is just too high. Cost may not be the best word here but it does seem that mountaintop experiences work to bring us closer to the harsh realities of the plains, of the real world where people live everyday, where people are hurting every day, where sometimes it seems that the glory of God is so far away as to be something that we read about in books, not something to be experienced by mortals. Even in the gospels this mountaintop experience is followed by Jesus meeting a boy who is possessed by a demon that is so strong that the apostles are unable to cast it out. Life at the bottom of the mountain is not so pretty but again, for some people, that is where God has called them to be, living at the bottom of the mountain, maybe with an occasional trip to the mountaintop but maybe not. One thing is sure, every mountaintop experience; every time we are drawn closer to God in worship or prayer or even in life, every time we get close to the “Glory of God” we open ourselves up to getting closer to the pain of humanity. You cannot be that close to God without getting that close to all of the pain that people live with every day, every day down here at the bottom of the mountain. If you live on the plateau, not too high and not too far down, you never have to get close to the dirt and disease and pain that people live with at the bottom of the mountain but you may also never experience the joy of the mountaintop either.

Should we seek those mountaintop experiences? Is this something that we should all want for ourselves? To be able to behold the glory of God up close, to stand in that shining light and see the face of Jesus? It sounds like something that we should all want because we all want to be good Christians, good people, spiritual people but should we all want this, knowing that if you see Jesus on the mountaintop then you have to be looking for Him at the bottom of the mountain as well. You will have to see Jesus in the drunk who is possessed by the demon of alcohol, you have to see Jesus in the face of that ragged looking person who doesn't smell too good who is buying \$50.00 worth of lottery tickets and calling it "financial planning." We have to see Jesus in the faces of all of those people who make us angry, who make us uncomfortable, and who make us afraid. That is the cost that I spoke of earlier, the price that has to be paid for those mountaintop experiences is that we have to make ourselves more vulnerable, more open, more aware of the pains of the world and we have to do something about them. Cost is not the right word for this because we know that the grace of God, the Glory of God does not cost us anything. That price has already been paid. This closer experience of the pain of the world is the result of the mountaintop experience and I think that if we are fortunate enough to have that kind of nearness to God then we are called to bring Jesus down from the mountain and out among the world and share as much of him as we can manage with everyone we meet. That is what the mountaintop is really all about, bringing Jesus back down that mountain with us. Nobody can stay on top of the mountain.