

Exodus 34: 29 – 35
2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4:2
Luke 9: 28 – 36
Last Epiphany, Yr. C.

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“Can You See the Promised Land?”

It had been a tumultuous spring. The country was increasingly riven by dissension. Riots had broken out across the country. There were accusations of police brutality with claims and counter-claims hurled in the media and in person. Dinner parties grew dangerous as people argued passionately for their views. Some people called for insurrection; there were calls to arms; people denied governmental authority and called for taking the law into their own hands. The disruptions were growing all the time. People feared the collapse of society as we knew it. A speech was given on the third night of April that spring. It was ostensibly about a labor strike but it was about so much more. Perhaps you’ve heard the final moments of that speech.

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. 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 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 so 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!!

The next day, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. April 4, 1968. Almost 50 years ago and so much has changed and so little has changed. We are still riven by dissension. We still wait to see the Promised Land. We may have been to the mountaintop for a moment; we may have had glimpses of glory for more people but far too many of us have only been afforded a look over at what could be. And too many of us still can’t even see the Promised Land as the clouds and storms of hatred and division obscure our eyes and drive us backwards. What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Is it enough to just get up to the mountaintop or are we to be changed by that experience and live our lives differently, working to change the lives of others?

It should come as no surprise that this last Sunday of Epiphany, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent, often called Transfiguration Sunday, might also be called Mountain-top Sunday. Our readings speak to critical up-at-the-top encounters with God. And going up to a high place is often a prelude to encountering the power and glory of God more directly and clearly than we might in our ordinary world. We also know, from these and other lessons in Scripture about encounters with God, that being in close proximity to God is often dangerous, sometimes deadly, certainly unpredictable, and definitely life-changing. It is almost never a prescription for a dull and boring life. And we also know that these encounters, life-changing that they may be, are temporary and really signal the beginnings of things rather than the end of things.

The transfiguration of Jesus, as told by Luke, is a mountaintop experience and serves, in some measure, to solidify Jesus' claim as the inheritor of the prophetic voice of Moses and Elijah but also points to Jesus as the superior and final prophet, one greater than all who have come before. Luke has this event occur eight days after Peter has first named Jesus as Messiah. Eight days implies a new creation; a new world is beginning. The arrival of Moses and Elijah, in their heavenly form, and the chatting about the coming crucifixion in Jerusalem, points toward the completion of God's redemptive plan through the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus. The three specially chosen disciples here play the role of the inconstant Israelites, and foreshadow their own behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane by struggling with sleepiness and reveal their limited understanding of God's actions by desiring to stay up on the mountaintop. Finally, the pre-eminence of Jesus as the Christ is revealed by God's voice echoing God's words at the baptism of Jesus by calling Jesus son and chosen and commanding that all listen to him. As signs go, this one did not work much better than a shiny face did for Moses. There is precious little evidence that the three chosen disciples remembered any of this peak experience or, if they did, it does not appear to have influenced their behavior until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

So, does it help to go up to mountaintops to get close to God or to get a better perspective? Do we get closer to God that way? Are peak experiences all they are claimed to be? What is the relationship between getting up and away to pray and the messy, earthy world back down below? I confess that my own mountaintop experiences have been less than remarkable. Mostly, the air seems thin and there is less life present in the high places than down in the valleys. Indeed, if we look at the world around us life is more abundantly found in the low-lying places; the most fertile and life-producing places are in swamps and tidal regions. While we might gain some new insight from being in a high place, we live most fully into our human existence when we wade into the mess and muck of human society and give ourselves over to complicated relationships.

It is when we risk ourselves, when we give up the spare distant intellectual contemplation suited for high minds and high places and plunge fully into the swirling maelstrom of life; when we are willing to stand unprotected and vulnerable, then, we live in the truest of thin places and align ourselves truly to God. We will be like the three disciples, chosen but confused by the ministry offered us. We will be distracted, forgetful; we will make mistakes along the way. Parishes mimic life in many ways. Parishes are fragile yet strong; muddled about many things but clear about the essential things. Parishes try to see clearly down the road and to guard against error; yet they make many mistakes along the way. Parishes waste time and sometimes even spend money unwisely because parishes are composed of humans. It is never simple, often confusing, sometimes exhausting, and deeply, deeply, human to be a parish. But when we try to do so it brings us into unity with mind and body, both individually and collectively; it makes us whole for it turns out that loving God and one another, being in community, being church, makes us holy.

But soon we will be forced to look up at the cross for Lent is coming. It will be not easy or comfortable to do so. Soon we will take that downward journey from Ash Wednesday to Good Friday. But as we do, we must ask ourselves, when was God's glory most revealed? Was it that night of April 3rd as Martin Luther King Jr. gave the last speech of his life or was it the next day

when he was murdered? Was it on the day of transfiguration, with Jesus clothed in dazzling white, with his unmarked face glowing, with Moses on one side and Elijah on the other or was God's profound love for us all, the love that created everything, the love that sees so clearly – God's full glory – most revealed on the day of His death, with Jesus barely clothed in tattered garments, with his face bloodied and torn, with thieves on either side?

Where do we see God and our Promised Land most clearly – in the upper reaches of the world, in the upper crust, in the high-brow parts or in the lowest depths of society, in the gutters of the world, in the faces and lives of the sinful and broken? Do we find God most in our joy or in our pain? Which of these places, which of these moments most reveals the transfiguring power of God and points toward the Promised Land?

Which of these is the true transfiguration?

Amen.