

The mountaintop we need  
Matthew 17:1-9

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I imagine the scene in our gospel happening early in the morning. Jesus comes to Peter, James and John and says come with me. They walk up a mountain. The air is cool as they walk up a stony dusty road. They get to the top and look out - seeing the landscape spreading away from them. The disciples wonder. Has Jesus come to pray? Jesus moves a bit away from them and all of a sudden is transfigured. His garments become dazzling white and two figures appear next to him Moses and Elijah. A voice comes from heaven saying this is my beloved in whom I am well pleased.

I find myself longing to be there – longing to be invited up to the mountain with Jesus, longing to see this transfiguration, to see Moses and Elijah and to hear God's voice. How must have the disciples felt as they walked back down the mountain? In a way, I suspect they felt transformed as well and for Peter a confirmation of what he had said several days earlier – you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Do you too long to be there on that mountaintop? Do you long for an experience of Jesus that transforms your life - an experience of God so amazing you can barely describe it?

The Working Preacher podcast I listened to this week pointed out that Lent is framed by two mountaintop experiences. The one we have today with Jesus being transfigured in his glory and then at the end of Lent, a very different mountaintop experience – Jesus crucified on the cross.

The commentary also pointed out that the transfiguration where Jesus is arrayed in his power and glory is the experience of Jesus we want, but the crucifixion with Jesus on the cross crying out – “My God My God, why have you forsaken me?” - is the experience we need. How true that is. We long for the transforming light of Jesus. We don't exactly long for the crucifixion.

That transforming moment of an experience of God can raise us up, and strengthen our faith and yet without crucifixion, we are missing an essential part of our journey with Jesus. Perhaps that is why Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone of what they have seen on the mountain top until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. They need the whole picture, because only having the mountaintop experience can get us into trouble

How often have I observed people measuring the depth and “success” of their faith by the number of times Jesus has “spoken” to them? Have they seen visions? Spoken in tongues? Most of the time, the answer is “no.” That longing can take over and make it seem as if we have no faith life at all. I have witnessed this in groups where we have been discussing spiritual experiences, and there will always be people, if they are brave enough to speak up, who say I have never had that experience. I have never encountered God when I was blown away with what I knew to be the presence of God. My life with Jesus has been slow and steady through prayer worship and the study of scripture.

And maybe this is why we need to hear this gospel as we head into Lent - as we set out with carefully chosen Lenten disciplines with the hope that they will transform our lives and bring us closer to Jesus transforming us with amazing moments. That may indeed happen, but Jesus reminds the disciples that there is more to come, because by dying on the cross Jesus has shown us a way to carry us and lift up through our sorrow, our despair, our pain, our abandonment and our grief. Jesus can do that because he has been there.

The cross is what will get us through the hospital waiting room, the bad diagnoses, the treatment that makes us ill, the loss of a job, the child that seems to be headed for trouble, the bills that never stop coming. The cross will get us through the dry moments of prayer, the loss of direction and the long dark night of the soul.

Now the world doesn't like to talk about the cross. Our world today wants us to focus on the mountain top moments where everything is shiny and bright. Friday before last, not last Friday almost 2 weeks before the start of Lent, I was in the grocery store and saw that the Easter bunnies were already being put on the shelves. I thought how am I going to get ready for Lent, which hasn't even started, when the Easter bunnies are already out. How can I talk about Lenten discipline and practices when the Easter celebration is already starting? I suspect the world would like to skip right from the Transfiguration to the Resurrection. But no that is not how God works and note that the resurrection does not happen on a mountain top. It happens in a tomb.

We may long for the Transfiguration, but we need the crucifixion, Jesus dying on the cross redeeming us, saving us and loving us. As you enter Lent, this time of letting go of distractions from God, taking up disciplines of prayer, spiritual reading and fasting, or doing for others in need, remember we have an awesome God one who does shine with the most dazzling of light and also one who was willing to go to the deepest and darkest parts of the human experience. This God will be walking with us as we prepare to enter Lent and beyond. God knows what we need. Let us trust in that as we once again journey towards the cross.