

1 Kings 19: 8b – 15

Matthew 17:1-13

As many of you know, I love the mountains. Being able to be in the Sierra gives me great joy. And so I am delighted that it is Mountain Sunday and I can share some of my holiday photos with you. *Most of them are actually of the lakes, trees and boulders that we find in our mountains.

*Mountains are important in Scripture – Mt Sinai and Mt Horeb were very significant for the Hebrew people, and later the temple was built on Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Mt Zion was described as the City of David and the prophets saw it as a place of pilgrimage for all peoples. In the New Testament, Mount Zion is used metaphorically to refer to the heavenly Jerusalem, God’s holy, eternal city. Christians are said to have “. . . come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:22-23)

*In Jesus’ own life, we see him going into the mountains to pray, he taught the Sermon on the mount, and visited the Mount of Olives; in today’s reading he went up a mountain and was transfigured, and he also ascended from a mountain top.

*There seems to be a strong connection between mountains and spiritual experience which is perhaps fundamental to human consciousness. For millennia we have met and worshipped on mountain tops – there is a sense of awe when you finally get up there and can see the view – it is as if you were a bird or a god yourself. It’s not surprising that the Greek gods were believed to live on Mt Olympus the highest mountain in Greece. The top of a mountain seems close to God; even when we stop believing that God is up there somewhere, mountains are magical. So much so that we talk about mountain top experiences –those moments when we feel especially close to God or in unity with all that is.

*So it’s not surprising that it was when Jesus took his closest disciples up a mountain that the spiritual experience we call the transfiguration took place. Here for a brief time the veil between the seen and the unseen worlds was thin enough for humanity to see the reality of the reign of God, symbolized by Moses and

Elijah – the law and the prophets. And for Jesus this was such a profound moment, that like Moses when he met with God on the mountain, his face literally shone with the light of God. Talk about a mountaintop experience!

I don't know whether Jesus knew that this was going to happen when he climbed up the mountain. We don't know when those moments of clarity of spiritual vision will occur, those moments when we are transported beyond the everyday boundaries of self and other and feel deeply connected with divine energy, with the oneness of creation and humanity. It happened to Thomas Merton in the middle of a busy city. He wrote:

*“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world. . .

*This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. . . . I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. *As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now that I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

*In that moment of transfiguration the disciples realized that Jesus was the Son of God and their lives were changed forever, and in that moment in Louisville, Merton realized that all humanity is one and that we are all transfigured – “all walking around shining like the sun.”

It takes more than physically walking up a mountain to have this kind of seeing.* I spent a week hiking and sitting in the mountains at about 9,000 feet and I did not receive a unitary vision. But Merton had his experience at less than 500 feet. It's not about altitude. It's not even about solitude. Mountain top experiences are a gift from God which we cannot manufacture. But I think they can be sought.

We can seek the face of God in an experiential way. Last week I spoke briefly about longing, longing for planetary healing. I think that when we long for an experience of God then God responds to us. But I also think that as we develop the

discipline of looking for God, of opening ourselves to God's presence then God responds to that practical expression of our longing. *If I tell you that I long to sail the Caribbean but have never looked at travel sites or read anything about sailing or the Caribbean, you might have reason to question my longing. If we long for an experience of God then we will engage in those activities most likely to connect us with the Spirit.

What that is will be different for different people – meditation, centering prayer, *lectio divina* or *lectio creatio*. **Lectio creatio* is a great phrase for those of us who most often find God in nature... you are no longer just looking at a sunset but when you consciously open yourself to meet God in the sunset, you are practicing reading creation as a way to connect more deeply with the Spirit. Of course you can read scripture and be unchanged, so too you can read creation and be unchanged. *A sunset is just a sunset unless you consciously open yourself to experiencing God in that sunset, just as the eucharist is just a wafer and a sip of wine unless you open yourself up to God and the possibility of meeting the divine.

Which brings us to another way that we prepare for the mountaintop. Expectation.* I am far more likely to have a meeting with God when I am expecting and looking for it. I think that is what makes the difference between a vibrant community of faith and a group of people going through the motions. If we come to church expecting and hoping for a meeting with God then we are far more likely to experience God even in a small way than we are if we just come to meet friends or to have a good sing.

This morning's reading about Elijah is a reminder that God is infinitely free and will meet with us when it is the right time and place in God's mind not in ours. *Although he clearly heard God telling him to stand on the mountain because our God was about to pass by, God was not where Elijah expected. God was not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence.

It is often in quiet reflection that we realize that God has visited us, that God has spoken in our lives through the words and loving care of others, through something we read or a snatch of a radio program. God's voice is usually quiet and calm. *Most of our experiences of God are quiet and unremarkable. They are not mountaintop experiences. They are not sudden world changing revelations but steady, regular, unremarkable connections as if God were walking next to us and every now and then reaches out to touch us.

Which may be why Jesus told the disciples not to talk about what had happened. He didn't want the crowds to start demanding that he conjure up Moses and Elijah.

He didn't want people to start thinking that the only way to experience God was in a cloud on the mountain, and that if their face didn't shine they somehow had failed or weren't good enough. Because that is the good news. None of us have failed and all of us are good enough.

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We may not have great mystical experiences. We may not climb mountains. It doesn't matter, because God loves every one of us unconditionally and longs for us to meet with Godself. *The question is whether we also long for God and whether we work to see with Merton that each one of us, that all people are "walking around shining like the sun."