

Mountain Top Experiences with Jesus
 Sermon notes for Last Sunday in Epiphany, February 19, 2012
 Church of the Epiphany, by the Rev. Arnold A. Bush

Text: Mark 9:2-9. Here is a multisensory experience of God: Supernatural glow, voices of Moses and Elijah, frightening emotions, Peter has the urge to remain on the mountain and capture this experience, voice of the Father God: "This is my beloved Son," an exhortation to "Listen to him."

Introduction: A vivid prayer experience

Ever heard of a "runner's high," a surfer's "high," free-fall skydiver's "high," a drug-induced "high"? Gallup surveys discovered that a large percentage of Christians have had some type of mystical experience with God (e.g., emotions, chill bumps, a flood of peace, a relaxing moment or a strange sensation, a voice, word from God.) In the Transfiguration of Jesus is a religious experience with various pieces. Today I want to highlight the multisensory aspects of a mountaintop experience.

- I. God reveals himself in many encounters on a mountain. Jesus took Peter, James and John to a high place.
 - a) Abraham takes his son Isaac to the mountain, anticipating offering his son as a sacrifice.
 - b) Moses goes alone to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the 10 commandments. (Movie: Cecil B. DeMille's *The 10 Commandments* with Moses receiving the commandments).
 - c) Elijah returned to Mount Horeb where his faith was rejuvenated.
 - d) Now, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John where something astonishing happens. They went to a place to pray! APPLICATION: Their intention was to find a place to pray. In traveling, finding a place to have a picnic, a rest stop along the interstate. Find a place in your home--a table, a chair, a patio--a place to go talk to God before corporate worship. Lent is a prayer. I know we can pray "on the go," but find a place, so when you are in that place you are talking and listening to God.

II. His appearance changes: Mark 9:2 "And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white."

Jesus has a supernatural glow. No word in the human language can describe this. In metamorphosis, an insect/animal is changed. Metamorphosis takes place in a butterfly. The cloud comes over them... maybe mist, the sun is blocked out, they hear conversing with Moses (the giver of the law) and Elijah (the greatest of the long list). In this account with Peter, James, and John we see something happened to Jesus. The three had experienced Jesus in his humanity, now they were seeing some of this divinity. What can we learn from this story? Prayer can and does change us. Certainly, praying on a daily basis effects our attitudes, thoughts, dreams, motives, etc. As we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, He rearranges some of our personality. Eventually, others will see the external changes our features, our ambiance, facial expressions, smiles, moods, and countenance of our face. It does not take an expert reader of body language to recognize a happy person. We certainly are able to read a person's depression, anger, unpleasant mood, gritting of teeth.

For example, I recall a former parishioner who requested a popular song to be played and sung at his Burial Service. He was critical of Episcopalians who left the communion rail without a smile or happy look in their demeanor. Somehow the musician found this song: "You have to accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. Latch on to the affirmative; and don't mess with Mister-in-between." Ward wished all Episcopalians knew that this Jesus was present in the sacramental elements in the Eucharist. When we leave the Eucharist, we need a bounce in our gait and an expression of thanksgiving on our face. (Joke: "Why, you look like you woke up grumpy this morning." "Oh no, I left the house this morning with grumpy in bed.")

III. The three are frightened: "Peter did not know what to say,
for they were terrified (frightened)"

When we encounter the living God in some vivid way, often there is fear in our emotions. When Gabriel appeared to Mary in the annunciation, he said, "do not be afraid." Persons who have been absent from worship often may say I am afraid to enter the church. For example, Larry in Jacksonville, FL; A several month's revival in Brownville Assembly of God in West Pensacola. (Joke: the roof will fall in, but we furnish helmets.) Just suppose a guest came into Epiphany who had never been inside a Christian Church and I was preaching on "Turn your life over to Jesus Christ." Their response: why I just got my life straightened out. Do you want me to lose control?

Deep down, as we meet this God of the Universe and the Father our Lord Jesus Christ, we have ambivalence he is going to ask us to do some things we do not want to change. Here are a few reflective questions for me, and I hope all of us: As I come to worship every Sunday, am I willing to let the Holy Spirit take over my life? Am I coming here just for the aesthetic experience? Social experience? Am I coming out of obligation? Is God nudging me to make some changes in my lifestyle?

VI. This is a positive, uplifting experience for Peter.

"Then Peter says to Jesus, Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, (tents, tabernacles), one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah."

So Peter wants to keep this experience, make it last longer, not move away from this experience. Just hang around the church and close fellowship. He does not want to go down the slope, but let us linger on the mountain. We are to have deep experiences of God but not build tents to stay in. No lingering. We say, "This feels so good, let's just hang around here."

When we have a vivid experience with the Lord, we too want to capture the moment. A Kodak moment. Last Wednesday night a friend of ours just returned from NYC where her son entertained her for 5 days. She had photos of all the places she visited in NYC: Ground Zero, the Metropolitan Museum, Trinity Church on Wall Street, Rockefeller Center, an opera. The trip was just wonderful. I want to go back again. This is what Peter wants to do: keep this experience in his mind. He wants to build a tent around this experience. It is like singing the old familiar hymns of which we have memories. Hymns do carry an emotional memory. Every time we sing "Oh, God our help in ages past" I have images of my deceased parents when this was sung at both of their funerals. At Easter we sing "Ye watchers and ye holy ones"; this was sung at my

ordination 49 years ago. Watch out, we may sing this every Sunday in the Easter Season! Ha-ha.

This attachment to a spiritual experience can keep us going down the mountain to do ministry to persons in need. I recall on a mission trip to Guatemala, 40 of us were having a great Eucharist one morning; there were some Lutherans with very strong voices. The temptation was to just stay there singing praises, offering prayers. We must go dispense many medications, open the medical clinic for hundreds of persons we came to serve. I recall hearing that we Episcopalians can fall into chill bump religion. We adore God in praise, but have no action. Praying to Christ without being willing to make changes in our lives. Ecstatic emotions without high ethical behavior. Be praying on our knees with good intentions but leave the Sunday worship without muscles to do acts of love.

IV. God speaks with an exhortation

"This is my beloved Son, listen to him," God is informing the three disciples that indeed, Jesus is the heaven-sent, long awaited Messiah and the Spirit-empowering figure who is declaring God is Love. Jesus is the revelation of me, the God of the Universe.

"Listen to him." Here is a defining moment. This is not just to have a chill-bump experience, a WOW, this is big. Why I felt so inspired and moved in my experience with God. Within the experience is the imperative, the command, the need for obedience. They must move and we must move beyond recognizing his identity in worship and then realign our lives around his words. Just imagine that Jesus made an appearance at Church of the Epiphany, that he walked through this door. I would sit down. Jesus we thank you for coming. What do you think he would say? Some of us would have questions: Your role with the Jewish authorities? Is this your second coming? Does faith in you really get us to heaven? Do you want us to help the disenfranchised? I am saying the same thing Father God said to Peter, James, and John that day before I went south to Jerusalem. "This is my beloved son, listen to him." Most of what I said in and around the Sea of Galilee and in Jerusalem is in your New Testament. The season of preparing for the Easter Celebration offer some good weeks to read what I said and did.

Conclusion: What can we do this Lent? Let us pray:

- Just as Jesus found a place for the four of them to pray, help us find our place to pray during the week.
- The countenance of Jesus was a sign of his divinity. Lord, as we engage in prayer we need to jump with joy in our gait. God, accentuate the positive and eliminate our negative attitudes.
- Peter was frightened. Give us strength to not be afraid to turn our lives over to you, Christ. We come to be changed!
- Yes, Lord, it is wonderful to desire to capture the serendipitous moments in worship, but give us power to move into the "valley" where others are hurting.
- Let Jesus exhort us to listen to his words and stories in the Scriptures this Lent.