

After the Mountain

A sermon on 2 Peter 1:16-21 & Matthew 17:1-9 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 February 2023

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Message

Stunning moments of spiritual clarity can be life-changing, but the real measure of our faithfulness is in how we live for the rest of the time.

Sermon

One of the books I used to use when I was teaching liturgy studies [Paul Basden (ed.), *Exploring the Worship Spectrum* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2004)] has a great format. The editor had brought together six different writers representing six different traditions of worship style, and not only do they each get a chapter to present and argue for their own approach, but they each get to write a brief response to everyone else's chapter.

One of the chapters presents a Pentecostal understanding of worship, and in one of the five responses to it there is an admission that I think many of us might resonate with. Harold Best writes:

“there is something within me that always wonders if, in my spiritual sojourn, I am missing something or if something has missed me. ... In all of my ups and downs ... there is still the longing, the wondering, even the lingering confusion that comes of hearing people talk about what this worship model accomplishes that another one does not. And when it comes down to the phenomenal, the overtly noticeable, the out-of-the-ordinary, I wonder again and again if I am missing out on something.” (p.155)

Does anyone else feel like that sometimes? I know I have my moments. You meet some people who talk as though they walk hand in hand with God in the garden every moment and can hear God's voice at will as clearly as you are hearing mine. And while some of them are obviously cranks or frauds, there are others who unsettle me more and make me wonder, at least a little.

I can imagine that if I'd been around the church in the first few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, I might have found myself feeling a lot like that if I'd heard Peter, James or John talking of having been present with Jesus on the mountain to witness the transfiguration.

I mean, can you imagine it? Suddenly the truth of who Jesus is was plain to see. He was transfigured before them, shining bright with all the glory of heaven and speaking with Moses and Elijah; and Peter, James and John were right there to witness it. I reckon even the rest of the disciples might have been feeling a bit spiritually inferior when they heard about that, let alone you or me.

But wait. Don't despair. There is something present in tonight's readings that can give us all cause to feel a bit better. Did you notice it?

It was in the reading from the second letter of Peter. Peter refers back to his presence there on the mountain as a witness to the transfiguration, and he does so to demonstrate that his teachings about the Christ and about Christian faith and discipleship can be trusted. Now

how is that supposed to make us feel any better about our rather more ordinary and unspectacular experiences of the Christ?

Well, this letter was written long after the event, thirty years at the very least and probably more. And I reckon it is pretty noteworthy that Peter is still trading on this particular story. The experience of that extraordinary day has not been repeatedly superseded by other equally stunning spiritual experiences. The Apostle Peter did not live a life of constant mountain top experiences where every day was another spectacular vision of the deep mysteries of heaven. Now I have no doubt that he had plenty of other profound experiences of God in prayer and contemplation and worship, but when he's looking to pull out one that is truly out of the ordinary, he's still looking back to one from decades earlier.

And when you think about that, we're probably all much like that. If I sat down and spent fifteen minutes telling you about my most life-changing experiences when God seemed most clear and present to me, you'd probably end up feeling like "Gee, how come I don't have those sort of experiences?"

But if I sat down and listened to you telling me about the moments when heaven seemed to open up before you and it all become clear, I'd probably go away feeling like I'd been missing out on something too. You'd be thinking to yourself, "these are two little experiences in a quarter of a century," but I'd be thinking, "Wow, you must be so spiritual and close to God."

When we are only hearing the highlight moments, it sounds as though that is the norm and it happens all the time. But for the one whose story it is, it is the edited highlights, in between which there were years of mundane ordinary faithfulness during which nothing special or spectacular ever seemed to happen. It was that way for the Apostles, and it continues to be that way for the vast majority of us.

And when you look closely at the gospel accounts of the transfiguration, you begin to see that this pattern of experience which we share is actually written into the story. The gospel writers seem to be telling us that that is what we should expect, and that that is the normal pattern of faithful Christian discipleship. In that extraordinary moment – that moment of overwhelming spiritual ecstasy when the three disciples suddenly see who Jesus is and what life, the universe, and everything is all about – they of course want to hang onto it, to make the moment last forever. Peter is the one who voices what they were probably all thinking, what we'd be thinking. "Lord, this is wonderful. How about I build some huts up here so we can all stay?"

Even as the words come out of his mouth, the experience becomes even more spectacular and profound. They are engulfed in the bright shining cloud of God's presence, just as Moses had been on the mountain top as we heard in our first reading, and the voice of God thunders from the cloud, "This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

And while Peter, James and John may not have twigged at that moment, Matthew's readers know how significant these words are because they are exactly the same words that the voice from heaven spoke as Jesus came out of the waters at his baptism. This is a clear and startling confirmation of who Jesus is and what he is on about.

But then it is all over. The experience they so desperately want to cling onto is gone. Jesus is there alone and looking perfectly ordinary. “Don’t be afraid,” he says. “Get up and let’s get going. There’s work to be done. And by the way: keep your mouths shut about what has just happened. Not a word to anyone, alright.”

And when you look at how this story fits in the progression of stories in the gospel, it becomes even clearer what it is saying. This comes just after the incident in which Peter has identified Jesus as the Messiah, the chosen one of God, but has then argued with Jesus about what all that means. Jesus has predicted his own rejection, arrest and execution, and Peter has tried to argue for a different understanding of what should happen to the Messiah. Jesus has responded with his famous line, “Get behind me Satan, for you are not thinking in godly ways, but in all too human ways.”

So when the transfiguration occurs as the very next scene, and Peter is there to witness it, we are being told that God is endorsing Jesus’s view of what it means to be the messiah.

And then when the majestic mountain top experience is suddenly over, and Jesus says, “Get up, let’s go,” they go down the mountain and run straight into some really difficult ministry where the rest of the disciples are already out of their depth trying to deal with a demonic attack. As wonderful as the mountain top experiences may be, it is back down here in the nitty gritty of working for God’s kingdom in the face of conflict, misery and suffering that the real work of following the messiah happens.

And that is precisely the message of this story for us, and Peter’s continuing use of the story in a situation of conflict over ministry decades later makes this clear. Real Christian faith is not about an endless procession of mountain top experiences. If and when you have those amazing moments where everything becomes clear and heaven opens up before you, enjoy them and give thanks for them and draw strength from them, but don’t be expecting that you should be having another one tomorrow.

The evidence of Christian faith and Christian maturity is not found on the mountain top, but in the faithful engagement with the demands of love, mercy and justice in the long and often tough times of service in the valleys between the mountain tops. The measure of your spiritual integrity is not in how frequent or intense your mountain top experiences are, but in how faithfully you live and love and pray and care the rest of the time. And in fact, the measure of the value and validity of the mountain top experiences themselves is the extent to which they produce fruits of love and hope and mercy and justice the rest of the time.

We know this pattern in our worship. In just a little while we will come together to the Lord’s Table to break bread and drink wine and commune with God, and for some of you it may be – for some of you it may even often be – a quite profound experience of intimate communing with God in the body of Christ. It might be a deep moment of transfiguration in which heaven opens before you and you see the body of Christ gathered here in your sisters and brothers transfigured in glory and shining with holy light.

If it is, wonderful. Praise God, and lucky you! But even if it is all that and more for you tonight, just a few minutes later you will be being commissioned to go out in the strength of that transfiguring moment and make it your first work to love. And some of the people you are sent to love will be particularly difficult to love. At that moment you will be called to

dedicate yourself to the tough road of discipleship, to handing over your future to God and allowing God to do with you as God will. And even if we can string out the ecstasy until bedtime, there still comes the moment when we have to go out into the world, and the worth of everything that happened in here will be tested by the way you and I live our lives among those we move among during the days that follow.

But as daunting as that may sometimes sound, the message that Matthew's gospel keeps hammering home, especially each time he takes us to the mountain top, is the message of Jesus for us, "Do not be afraid, I will be with you."

Since the start of this gospel when he was identified as Emmanuel, God with us, and on to the end where his final words are "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the world," we hear it again and again. And that promise is clearly not about more and more mountain top experiences, for on the mountain top everything is clear and we do not need to be reminded. It is as we come down from the mountain, and as we go out from the intimacy of communion with our risen Lord in this place, that we need to be reminded. "Do not be afraid, I will be with you. Now, let's go."