

February 27, 2022

# Last Sunday after the Epiphany

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Exodus 34:29-35  
2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2  
Luke 9:28-36, [37-43a]  
Psalm 99



Grace and peace to you from God — our light, our life, and our salvation. Amen.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? Maybe a literal one? Maybe a spiritual one? Maybe both?

I remember a mountaintop experience of my own from a few years ago, with a group of confirmation students up at our Lutheran camp in New Hampshire, called Camp Calumet. We strapped on our snowshoes one cold day and started our climb up a steep incline called Jackman Ridge. While the students lept up the trail like mountain goats, the chaperones followed behind a little more timidly. My body didn't quite know what to feel by the time we got to the top — I was out of breath, freezing, and overheated all at the same time. I remember sitting down on a big rock, bowing my head, and taking a few seconds to think about my life choices, before even noticing my surroundings. After I caught my breath, I remember hearing one of the girls shout, "let's take a picture for Instagram!" That is when I looked up and joined the collective mountaintop experience. From the top of Jackman Ridge, we could behold the beauty of the snow-covered White Mountains stretched out in front of us as far as the eyes could see. The journey up the mountain was certainly worth the exertion. The combination of the cold, clean air, warm, shining sun, and the silence of the woods punctuated only by our chatter and laughter was a true mountaintop experience. It was an experience of beauty, of seeing the world from a new and different perspective, and a sense of connection with something larger than ourselves. The thing about mountaintop experiences, though, is that they don't last forever. You have to go back down the mountain, and you don't necessarily know when that next mountaintop experience will come. So you have to be present in the moment, soak in the experience, and store it up as sustenance for the unpredictable journey ahead.

I think Jesus probably knew exactly what he was doing when he took Peter, James, and John with him up a high mountain by themselves. What happened at the top of that mountain wasn't necessarily unique — plenty of other people had seen the heavens open up and the voice of God declare, "This is my

Beloved Son!” at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan. But the setting was unique. Somewhere different, removed from their everyday lives, away from the noise and distractions that they were used to. The setting was a place where they could hear and see and experience God more clearly. It wasn’t quite as serene as our experience at Camp Calumet, though. In fact, it seems like it was terrifying for them. They fell to the ground and were overcome by fear when they heard this voice and saw Jesus transfigured before them. But Jesus speaks a word of encouragement to them: “Get up and do not be afraid.” he says. Get up, and do not be afraid.

I wonder if this is the central message of all of our mountaintop experiences. Whether or not they are terrifying, they are moments when we are hyper-aware of God, and opportunities for us to hear God say “do not be afraid.” Whether peaceful or terrifying, on the banks of a river or in church or on a mountaintop, they are moments when we are suddenly and acutely aware of God’s presence with us and throughout the whole of God’s creation.

As I said, though, the thing about mountaintop experiences is that they don’t last forever. You have to go back down the mountain. Peter wanted to stay on the top of that high mountain, he wanted to build dwellings for Jesus and the visions he saw of Moses and Elijah. But they weren’t meant to dwell in that experience. They were meant to go back down the mountain and to cherish that experience in their hearts.

So have you ever had a mountaintop experience? A powerful realization or revelation of God’s presence? They can happen anywhere, not just on mountain tops.

Henri Nouwen writes that, “At some moments we experience complete unity within us and around us. This may happen when we stand on a mountaintop and are captivated by the view. It may happen when we witness the birth of a child or the death of a friend. It may happen when we have an intimate conversation or a family meal. It may happen in church during a service or in a quiet room during prayer. But whenever and however it happens we say to ourselves: “This is it ... everything fits ... all I ever hoped for is here.””

Classical biblical cosmology might have us believe that God

is found up high, somewhere up there — on the mountaintop, in heaven. But the paradox of mountaintop experiences is that they show us just the opposite. God is here, God is among us, God is in our midst. And because of God's gracious presence at every moment in our lives, the good the bad, and everything in between, we don't need to be afraid. Henri Nouwen says, "These moments are given to us so that we can remember them when God seems far away and everything appears empty and useless. These experiences are true moments of grace."

Biblical cosmology might have us believe that God is found up high, away from the earth. Mountaintops, heaven. But today, we are assured that that is not the case. Or rather, that God is not only there, but everywhere. In Jesus, we see the mountaintop experience, the closeness of the presence of God, walk down the mountain and enter into our humanity, into our daily lives.

So whether or not you can remember a dramatic mountaintop experience of your own, today can be a call to look for that same kind of awareness of God's presence in your everyday life. In the moments when God might feel farthest away, we can remember that God's Spirit is always with us with the assurance that we don't have to be afraid, that we too are God's beloved children, with whom God is well pleased. We can remember that the same Jesus who was transfigured on that mountaintop long ago and far away is still at work in the world, transfiguring and transforming and renewing our lives for the sake of God's work in the world. Amen.