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2 Peter 1:16-21

Matthew 17:1-9

WITNESSES OF MAJESTY

Mountaintop experiences – some people have these uplifting exhilarating religious experiences. Perhaps they are called that because of Moses' encounter with God on Mount Sinai or the experience that gets called the transfiguration as described in our scripture readings today. Let me admit something to you – I think this story of Jesus shining, dead people chatting, Peter talking some nonsense, a cloud that settles over them, with a disembodied voice instructing them can be a little off-putting because a lot of us haven't experienced anything remotely like this before. Is this story about theology, psychology, meteorology, some other kind of ology? This mountaintop up-there story is more than a bit out there. There is really not much else like it the gospel accounts.

There are those who believe that such strange religious encounters have to be experienced to enrich or even validate one's faith. And some of us wonder if Peter, James, and John can experience such unfiltered divine majesty, why can't we? It does seem though that there can be problems with a God-on-the-mountaintop type of Christianity that leads to the compartmentalization of our lives. It can entice us to separate sacred from secular, the mountain from the valley, the spectacular from the mundane. Is God somehow more present during a special worship service, a riveting anthem, or a silent retreat in a secluded monastery, than God is when we're in the grocery store, walking the dog, or driving to work? Discernment of God's presence is harder and messier in everyday life as we look for God minus blinding lights and thundering voices. But the God of the whisper is still a majestic, present God.

In its worst forms, mountaintop Christianity could be addictive, such that we spend our days pursuing an over-the-top Super Bowl spirituality we might imagine as spiritual accomplishment. We should recognize that in the spectacularity of the spiritual Super Bowl, sometimes the wrong team wins. We sit at an altitude here of 282 feet above sea level. When we constantly look for an experience a whole lot higher than that, without getting that spiritual high, we may feel empty, unloved,

angry, or just bored. Meanwhile, we don't even notice the ever-present God in whom we actually live and move and have our being. Desperate for the mountain, we miss the God of the valley, the classroom, the playground, the dinner table. Chasing after, even worshiping the extraordinary, doesn't make for a healthy faith.

In Matthew's telling, Peter responds to Jesus' transfiguration with an affirmation, immediately followed by a proposal: "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will set up three tents here." Peter says it was good for them to be there – and it is good to set aside times and places for contemplation. It is good to gaze upon Jesus, whenever and however he reveals himself to us. It is good to move out of our comfort zones and be confronted by the indescribable otherness of the divine. Prior to this event, Peter and his fellow disciples had experienced Jesus as a teacher, a storyteller, a healer, and a traveling companion. His face, his manners, his voice, his mission - all were familiar to them - familiar, endearing, and safe.

Then one day, high up on a mountain, the unimaginable happens. Before their very eyes, Jesus changes, becoming at once fully himself and fully unrecognizable. The man they think they know is suddenly more, suddenly other. And the path that lies ahead of him that would end on another high place, a hill called Golgotha, would upend everything the disciples thought they understood about Jesus.

Whenever we think we have God figured out, it's probably a good thing to be reminded that we're wrong. Whenever we try to stuff Jesus into a theological, cultural, or political box for our own convenience, it's good to have that box deconstructed. Whenever we grow complacent, self-righteous, or lazy in our lives of faith, it's good to be brought to our knees by a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose ways are not our ways. There are very good things that can come out of an encounter with Jesus on the mountaintop.

On the other hand, it's not good to fixate on the sublime so much that we desecrate the mundane. Most of life, at least for me, is unspectacular. Most of life doesn't dazzle us with non-stop special effects. But all of life, a - l - l, all contains the sacred. The challenge is to cultivate the kind of sight that perceives God in places darker, murkier, and flatter than a mountaintop.

As soon as Peter affirms his experience, he tries to hoard it. What I hear in his plan to set up tents is an understandable but ultimately misguided attempt to contain, domesticate, and possess the sublime, to harness the holy, to make the fleeting permanent. Let's keep Jesus shiny, beautiful, and safe up on a mountain. After all, everything is so good up in this high place. So clear. So bright. So unmistakably spiritual. Why not stay forever?

Well, because God says otherwise. Even before Peter is finished speaking, God covers James, John, and him in a thick cloud, and tells them to listen to Jesus - not to their own misconceptions about the life of faith. It's Jesus' way - the way of the valley, the way of humility, the way of the cross that followers of Jesus must learn to follow.

We then hear that the disciples are overcome with fear when God speaks to them out of the cloud. They cower in silence, and fall to the ground. However, then comes the part of the story that most resonates with me: "Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone."

Jesus comes and touches his frightened friends in a way that had brought healing to others. In that simple, ordinary human encounter of skin on skin, the disciples catch their breath, begin to shed their fear, and return to themselves. Finally, they see the divine in a guise they can bear. As it turns out, Peter, for all his eagerness and bluster, isn't made for unending transfigurations. He can't handle too much of the spectacular. All he can actually take of God's majestic presence is a tender human hand on his shoulder, and a reassuringly human voice in his ear.

We can still yearn for mountaintop experiences, and that's okay. They'll come and go according to God's will and timing, not according to our micromanagement. In that sense, sublime spiritual experiences are easy; they require little from us. We can't control them. What's hard is consenting to follow Jesus back down the mountain. What's challenging is learning to cultivate awe and wonder in the face of the mundane. What's essential is finding Jesus in the rhythms and routines of the everyday, in the loving touch of a friend, in the human voices that say, "Don't be afraid," in the unending challenge to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are in the middle of our story. We can't know ahead of time what mountains and valleys lie ahead. We can't predict how God will speak, and in what guise Jesus might appear. But we can trust in this: whether on the brightest mountain, or in the darkest valley, Jesus abides. I hope we can experience that divine presence in the birth of a child or a death of a friend, in the blooming of crocuses and forsythia, in an intimate conversation or a family meal. There is holy light and there is Jesus' hand, that remains warm and solid on our shoulders. When we're on our knees in some overwhelming experience, he whispers, "Do not be afraid." So, let's listen to the ordinary and to what Jesus says. As we keep listening, we will realize it is good for us to be here.

