

Coming Down from the Mountaintop
C. Gray Norsworthy
Johns Creek Presbyterian Church
February 14, 2021
Transfiguration Sunday

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. – Mark 9:2-9, NIV

If I were to ask you this morning to tell me of a “mountaintop experience” in your life, what event would come to mind? I have been thinking about that, and one that comes to mind for me was literally a mountaintop experience. Back in the summer of 2001, I went out to Colorado for a two-week clergy training event. We stayed at the St. Malo retreat center near Estes Park. It is a beautiful place run by the Roman Catholic Church with a gorgeous stone chapel out front. It also backs up to Rocky Mountain National Park, and right behind the center is Mt. Meeker – a daunting peak that is a few feet shy of 14,000 feet high. One of the nice things about that training event was that we had time to hike those amazing mountains.

One day a group of us decided to begin our hiking excursions by going up to the top of Lookout Mountain, which was over 10,000 feet high. We started up and had a great time talking and visiting all the way up. This particular peak is great because at the top, there is a flat surface about half as big as the Chancel up front in our Chapel. When we arrived at the top, you had to give each other a boost to make it to the top, while someone from above pulled you up by your arm. But once you were up there -- what a sight! You could look at the beauty of God’s creation – the taller 14,000-foot peaks, as well as down into the valleys. It was an incredible sight!

After we all had been sitting there for a while, resting from the hike up and taking in the vistas, we noticed off in the distance something you always have to keep an eye out for in the Rocky Mountains, especially in the afternoons. A storm was forming - and it was coming fast! By the time we noticed it, there were already some lightning strikes on the distant peaks. Realizing that being at the very top of one of these peaks during a lightning storm was not that smart, we all began to scramble down from our peak – which actually took a lot longer than we thought because you had to lower everyone off of this perch.

By the time we got down off of that rock formation, it was already raining. We had to wind our way around the rocks at the top of this mountain and soon the rain was coming down in torrents. Even in the summer, sheets of cold rain really did not feel that good. But what worried me more was the lightning. For some reason I did not notice it hiking up the mountain, but even as I was running through the rain with water dripping in my eyes, I now noticed all of the scorched trees near the top of that mountain. And it occurred to me that those burnt skeletons of wood had been struck by lightning. It also occurred to me that I was the tallest one in our group – a fact not lost on the other shorter members of the group. On the way down, they began to run closer to me -- I guess thinking that if lightning hit, it would most likely go to the tallest thing which, in this case, was me. And as the lightning hitting all around us, there was not the usual time lag between the flash and the sound. The two were simultaneous -- which told me the lightning was hitting really close. So, we ran as fast as we could in the pouring rain, hoping not to die in the process.

Finally, after we made it off of the top, I thought about the contrast between being on the mountaintop and seeing these amazing vistas of God's creation, and in a very short time being driven off of the mountaintop into the chaos of the lightning-filled storm as we scrambled for our lives. And I wondered if the kind of contrast was something the disciples could relate to in the stories this morning from Mark's gospel.

The story begins with Jesus taking this "inner group" of disciples – Peter, James, and John – up on a mountain to pray. From time to time, Jesus seemed to focus on this smaller group, maybe because he knew they would be some of the leaders in the early church after he was gone. Or maybe they were just closer to him and he wanted their company and support. As the disciples are struggling between praying and falling asleep up on the mountaintop, something amazing happens to Jesus. His physical presence is transformed, reflecting something of the glory of God. And Elijah, the great prophet of Israel, and Moses, the great lawgiver (both of whom lived long ago) appear with Jesus. Mark says they end up talking about his "departure" (literally "exodus" in the Greek) which will soon take place in Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus seems to be talking about his upcoming crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Peter and the others are awake enough to notice what is going on, and as these two visitors from the past are about to leave them, Peter blurts out what many of us probably would be thinking. Peter was like that and Mark notes this by saying that Peter really did not know what he was saying. I think that Peter must have been a true extrovert as opposed to an introvert. Introverts usually think before they speak, while extroverts often use the process of speaking to help them work out what they think. One is not necessarily better than the other. But Peter says that it is good for them to be there, having this mountaintop experience with these great saints from the past, so they should just build a retreat center and stay there – something like that. It was a normal human response to want to stay up on the mountaintop. Most of us, if we had the nerve, would probably have said the same thing. But then a cloud appears, and a voice from God says, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him." (Mark 9:7b, NIV) And when the voice is finished, they are alone.

And while this story ends here, Mark goes on to another very interesting story right after this one that happens the next day. (Mark 9:14-29) Our lectionary reading for today does not include this other story, but it is the story of what happens when they come down from the mountaintop. When they come down from this incredible experience, they, too enter a time of chaos. There is no lightning, but there is a great crowd, and one man tells Jesus that his only son is suffering from a demon that causes him to go into convulsions that sound a lot like epilepsy to us today. He says that the disciples of Jesus have tried to make him better, but they could not. And again, the boy goes into another seizure that throws him to the ground. (The Greek word there describes what a wrestler does when he gives something like a body slam to his opponent.) It is chaos! And Jesus seems very frustrated at the whole thing, calling them an “unbelieving generation.” It is a hard passage to understand. Is Jesus mad at the disciples because they could not heal the boy? Is he mad at the others who have such little faith that the disciples cannot heal?

In a Bible study a while back, we looked at this passage and someone suggested that it may have been like a coach who had trained his players to run a play, but they fail to execute it. I can remember coaching my own girls in basketball and how we worked on our plays. Early on, another coach told me that it was important to have an in-bounds play to run under your own basket when you had the ball out of bounds on a throw in. So, we worked on a play in which we would yell, “Line up!” Everyone got in a single line, and when the person throwing the ball inbounds slapped the ball and said “Go!” the first person in line went one way, the next the other and so forth, and we scored almost every game on that play. When it worked, it was a thing of beauty! But, when it didn’t, as a coach you get frustrated because we practiced it again and again and we knew what to do. So, maybe Jesus was frustrated like a coach with his player/disciples who did not do what they had been trained to do, and what they had done before. Maybe. But this extended story doesn’t end with Jesus’ words of frustration. Jesus tells the father to bring his son to Jesus, and Jesus heals the boy and returns this only son to his father.

I believe that what makes this passage so relevant to our lives today is found in the tension between these two stories. The first story speaks to a natural human tendency. When things are going well, when we are “up on the mountaintop,” we want to stay there. Maybe it is why some of us moved to Johns Creek in the first place. We wanted to get away from the chaos of city life. It is a natural human tendency to want to stay where we hope life is good – which may be like Peter wanting to stay up on the mountain top. It is what Peter wants to do – almost as if they could stop time and forget about all the chaos of life down below or out there. But that is not how life really is – is it? We can’t just stop time, can we? In our lives today, we can’t go to a place where there is no global pandemic and its effects.

A while back, I was talking with someone about this passage, and this person compared “coming down the mountain” to going to see a movie. She and her husband had gone to see the movie, *Avatar*, which I had not seen at the time, though I have since. But I had seen the promos and I had heard it is the frontrunner to win the Oscar for movie of the year. If you have seen it, you know it takes place in a beautiful, virtual world and you can

watch it in 3-D with special glasses. This person I was talking with obviously really liked the movie. But she said that when she came out of the movie and she had to take off her 3-D glasses, it was a real letdown to have to get back to “the real world.” I think our natural tendency is to want to stay in the good times, but this story reminds us that as good and meaningful as those mountaintop experiences are, at least in this life, we can’t stay there. Life calls us to go down the mountain and into the chaos of real life. And trying to stay on the mountaintop may be as impossible as trying to live permanently in a virtual world with 3-D glasses.

Yet, remember that it is God who is leading us down the mountain and back into that chaotic world. The same God who gives us these wonderful mountaintop experiences in our spiritual lives, is the God who often leads us down the mountain back into the world, but for a purpose. You see, it is in that other world that we encounter human need, and we find the opportunity and privilege to share what we have to offer with others. Maybe we will be successful at doing that. Or maybe we will fail miserably like the disciples did. Whatever the case, God leads us down the mountain – sometimes gently, but sometimes it feels like a lightning storm driving us down by force. Yet, God calls us to go down into the chaos of life and share what we have to give with others.

And we need both of those kinds of experiences to live life as followers of Christ. We need the mountaintop experiences – the encounters with God that take place in worship or at other times – that fill us up and keep us going. But we also need the other experiences which challenge us to give out what we have taken in.

Elizabeth O’Conner has described this as the *journey inward* and the *journey outward*. The journey *inward* relates to our spiritual journey inward to connect with God. We all need that. It forms the bedrock and the relationship that sustains us through life. Without that inward connection, we have nothing to share, and in time we will simply burnout. However, the journey *outward* focuses on our choosing to give to others our time and our talents as we intentionally go out into the world to minister to others in the name of Christ. But we need both experiences. We cannot live only on the journey inward any more than we can choose to live life by only breathing in. It doesn’t work. We need to exhale as well as inhale. In the same way, we need to give out and share what God has put inside each one of us. It is the rhythm of the Christian life.

We see that here in Johns Creek Presbyterian Church in a number of ways. Over the years our commitment to giving to mission and benevolences reflects the journey outward. We also see it in the lives of all the folks who volunteer in ministry and mission opportunities in Johns Creek and around the world. This is the giving out -- the choosing to enter into the chaos of life in order to bring healing where there is suffering. If you have yet to find a place to give of yourself, I want to invite you to do that. You need it, and others need it as well. Email me if you need to find a place to journey outward and “exhale” what God has breathed into your life.

Friends, the good news in all of this is that whether we are on the mountaintop experiencing the highs of life as followers of Christ, or whether we are down in the chaos

of life and the valleys that are also a very real part of life as a follower of Christ – God is there with us in both places. God is with us -- both on the mountaintops and down in the valleys. We are never alone. So, enjoy the mountaintop experiences. They are truly a gift from God whether they are the extraordinary beauty of creation, or the times that we gather for worship now or in the days to come – we need those experiences in our lives. Enjoy them! But know that we can't choose to live there all of the time. We can't push a button to stop time and stay there always. In fact, we were not created to do that – at least not in this life. God calls us to enter into the rhythm of this life - the journey inward and the journey outward, breathing in and breathing out, taking in, but also giving out. And in doing that, we truly live out the life that God has called us to as followers of Christ.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.