

Luke 9:28-43
"Down and Out"
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Some amazing things can happen at the top of a mountain. I can recall standing at the top of Longs Peak in Colorado, looking out over the beauty and splendor of the Rockies from 14,259 feet in the air. My friends and I began hiking at two in the morning, and reached the summit a little over seven hours later. During our seven hours of hiking and climbing, we witnessed breathtaking views, such as the blanket of stars that covered the night sky, and the crest of the sun rising over the Rocky Mountains. From the summit we beheld mountains and plains, rivers and fields. It's said that on a clear day you can see Kansas from the top of Longs Peak. The whole experience for me was vivid and memorable, and as a twenty year-old college student I was completely captivated by the sheer wonder of seeing God's creation from the top of a mountain.

The sense of wonder lasted only until we started our way back down. A few minutes after beginning the descent I threw up from the exertion. I suddenly realized my knees hurt, and I had painful scrapes on my hands and bruises on my arms. By the time we got back to the trail head, my feet were killing me, and I was absolutely

exhausted. I took one last wistful look back in the direction of the peak, remembering what I had seen there, and then simply drove home to go to bed. I had to work the next day, and as you might imagine, the transition between mountaintop and day job was a difficult one.

Many Christians have compared the Christian life to mountain climbing, and I think it's a pretty good analogy. In our lives of faith, we have peaks and valleys, moments of intense challenge and invigorating triumph along with moments of pain and exhaustion. There are moments of overwhelming beauty, but also times when we just want to throw up. The moments that affect us the most, I think, are those mountaintop experiences, those vivid and memorable times when the beauty, and splendor, and mystery of God break into our everyday lives and for a brief moment take our breath away. Sometimes this happens in an encounter with nature, but we also find ourselves deeply affected by moments of compassion, moments of sacrifice, moments of love. Sometime in your life, I would bet that you've had a mountaintop experience, a moment in which you felt close to God, one of those genuinely

formative experiences that shapes who you are and what you believe for years to come.

With that in mind, I'm going to ask you to do something a bit out of the ordinary. Take a minute to think about your mountaintop experiences. Close your eyes and recall a moment when you felt closest to God, a moment when you were awestruck by God's presence. Remember how you felt at that moment, and try to recall every single detail about where you were, who was with you, and how you felt as the event unfolded. In the next few moments of silence, try to relive that experience as best you can.

[Moment of silence]

Now open your eyes. Like all things, our mountaintop experiences must come to an end, and the transition back into the real world can be a difficult one. Don't you wonder what Peter, James, and John were thinking as they walked down the mountain with Jesus? They had just witnessed the single most amazing thing they had ever seen. *Jesus began praying on the mountaintop, and while he was praying the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Then suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.* Needless to say, this was not the

kind of thing that you simply walk away from as if nothing had happened! Peter, in an attempt to postpone their descent from the mountain, suggests that they stay up there a while longer. *Let's build some buildings!* he says, *One for Jesus, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. Let's stay here a while! Let's build our lives around this moment!* It was for Peter, both literally and figuratively, one of those mountaintop experiences. It's no wonder he didn't want to come down.

Recently I saw a report on CNN describing the emotional letdown (and in some cases a deeper depression) that a number of moviegoers experience after seeing the movie *Avatar*. It seems that many of them, especially those who saw the movie in 3D, were taken with the sheer beauty of the world James Cameron has created and found themselves wishing that the *Avatar* world of fantasy were real. Thought the movie is some three hours long, I can imagine moviegoers remaining in their seats as the closing credits rolled, not quite ready to make the transition from the beauty and brilliance of *Avatar* to the chaotic and cluttered world in which we all live. Yet, if you've been to a movie theatre before, you know that it always happens: the screen goes black and the house

lights come on, jarring us back into the real world. We notice disgustedly that our shoes are sticking to the floor and someone has spilled popcorn in the seats. With one last wistful glance at a dark movie screen we put on our jackets and head for the exits. Is it so strange for us to want to linger in a more beautiful world for just a little bit longer? Can we blame Peter, James, and John for wanting the same thing? The transition from one world to another is a rude awakening to be sure, and it's something akin to the disappointment the three disciples felt after their mountaintop experience was over. *It is good for us to be here. Let's just bask in the glory of this place. Let's build our lives around this moment.*

The Christian life is full of mountaintop experiences. They are the times when we find healing, or an energizing worship service. It's tempting to want our religious journey to be made only of mountaintop experiences. Then we might bypass the chaos, the challenge, and the struggle. In our mountaintop moments, something inside us cries out, *It is good for us to be here. Let's just bask in the glory of this place. Let's build our lives around this moment.* There's a well-known Hallmark-style proverb that tells us, "life is not measured by the number of breaths you take, but by the

moments that take your breath away.” This may be true to some degree, but it’s also true that life – especially the Christian one – continually calls us down from those breath-taking moments, down from the mountaintop, and out into the world. We are called to descend from our moments of profound glory, celebration, and joy, into the valleys of this world where life is messy, and challenging, and inhospitable.

I don’t think it’s by accident that Mathew, Mark, and Luke, the three gospel-writers who mention the Transfiguration infuse the story with foreshadowing of Jesus’ death. In our scripture reading for this morning we are told that Moses and Elijah are speaking to Jesus about "his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem." "Departure" here is another word for "death". We're meant to understand that the distance between the mountaintop and the cross is not so great that Jesus’ disciples should lose sight of either one. In our mountaintop moments we are to recognize the sacrifices that we are called to make, just as Jesus did. In our moments of despair we are to remember God's sovereignty and reign over all things. The mountaintop cannot be separated from the cross.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke also follow the Transfiguration immediately with the story of a boy who is desperately ill. Here in Luke's gospel we find a distraught father begging Jesus to *look at my son*, which reminds us of God's own words on the mountaintop: *This is my son! Listen to Him!* Taken together, these two exhortations call us to direct our attention both upward and outward – upward in praise, outward in service. Here the mountaintop experience of God's glory is indelibly connected with the chaos and clamor of a shrieking, convulsing demon. It's a reminder that while the Christian life is full of moments of mountaintop splendor, we are ultimately called to enter the valleys of illness, sorrow, despair, and oppression, that we might minister to those who live there, and set them free. It is significant here that in one of the few instances in which God speaks aloud in the gospels, God directs the followers of Jesus to *listen*. This not only entails silencing our own desires and intentions, but additionally striving to do and be as God intends, not as we ourselves intend. Listening is a necessary prelude to following and doing.

So, along with Peter, James, and John, we follow Jesus, and we listen. We listen as he encounters shrieking demons, worthless

outcasts, and unclean sinners. We hear him say things like, "Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me." We listen as he tells the stories of an outcast who stops by the roadside to help a stranger, and a father who runs down the road and throws open his arms to welcome his insolent son home. We listen as he tells us to love our enemies and neighbors alike, *just as we love ourselves*. And we listen as he asks God to forgive those who nailed him to the cross.

On any given Sunday, many of us are surrounded by visions of God's glory. We worship in resplendent sanctuaries adorned with breathtaking stained glass windows and shining brass candlesticks. We glorify God in the highest, singing hymns of resounding triumph and praise. These aren't necessarily bad things, but they could potentially result in a separation between the visually pleasing world of glory and the extremely challenging and chaotic world of service. The danger is that we might get lost on the mountaintop, and forget our way down.

We do tend to get lost up there, I think. There are times when the distance between Sunday and Monday seems to be about a million miles, and the path from the mountaintop to the dark valley

is very difficult to find. Yet, we follow a Savior who leads us down and out: down from the mountaintop, out of the clouds, and into the valley to meet those who are in need.

Thomas Merton once described a moment in which he realized that the ordinary people milling around in the streets around his home weren't just ordinary people - they were beautiful and unique. He wrote: "I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs—it was like waking from a dream of separateness to take my place as a member of the human race. I had the immense joy of being a member of the race in which God himself became incarnate. If only everybody could realize this. But it cannot be explained—there is no way of telling these people that they are all walking round shining like the sun."¹

That, I think, is the real moment of transfiguration. It's the moment in which all those people around us, wherever we may be, become beautiful, and precious, and lovely in our sight. If we follow Jesus long enough through the valleys of this world, those around us will become transfigured. Peter, James, and John, though they

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

just wanted to stay at the top of the mountain, would one day be the ones touching the demon-possessed child and welcoming the outcasts and forgiving the sinners. The real transfiguration happens not on the top of a mountain, but down in the valleys, out in the painful places of the world. Let us pray this morning that as Jesus goes on ahead of us, we would have the vision, the courage, and the faith to follow him wherever he leads us. Then we might see the glory – and the greatness – of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.