

February 7

Luke 9:28-43

Encouragement and Reality

Our scripture presents two days in the life of Jesus and his three closest disciples. The time on the mountain, an event we call the transfiguration, is an awesome experience in every sense of the word. Think about the word pictures and images presented. His face changed, his clothes flashed white like lightning, to use the Common English Bible translation. Moses and Elijah show up. They too were clothed with heavenly splendor. I love that translation. Then a voice comes out of the cloud telling the disciples to listen to Jesus. It ends with them being speechless. We get that? We too would be speechless if we were witnessing these events.

Contrast this with what is happening down at the base of the mountain. The remaining nine disciples were waiting for Jesus to return. Obviously someone had figured out where Jesus was because a crowd had begun to gather to wait with them. The disciples, by this time, had been sent out to preach the good news and had even done a little healing in Jesus' name. We picture them sharing a bit of the good news when a man in the crowd comes forward asking them to heal his son. They did all they could and nothing worked. We can imagine the comments coming from the crowd. If the three on the top of the mountain were feeling closer to God than they had ever felt in their lives, the nine on the bottom were feeling defeated and confused and I am sure not sensing the presence of God. Jesus, coming down with the three, hears about what is happening and scolds all present for their faithlessness. Jesus then heals the child and everyone was overwhelmed by God's greatness. It doesn't say how this scolding or healing made the nine feel, but my guess is that they left that place with bruised egos not wanting to hear about the experiences of the three on the mountain.

What does all of this say to us? First, I am reminded that in our lives there are moments of brightness. These are the times when God seems extremely close. Just like the disciples, we are left speechless by the immensity, the closeness and the love of God when a time like this happens in our lives. We may not see Jesus transfigured with

Moses and Elijah and hear the voice of God, but we know, without a doubt, that God is surrounding us.

When I think of this I remember a time early in my life. We had very good friends. They had been deaconesses in the United Methodist Church. They had never married and in old age my father had taken over a lot of their business affairs. We heard that one of them had been taken to the infirmary of the place they lived and we were told she was not expected to live. Upon arriving we found her in a semi-coma, resting comfortably. It was close to lunchtime and so my father asked me if I would stay with her while they went and got something to eat and they would bring me back something. I said sure, thinking I would just sit there and read my book. They had been gone just a bit when Miss Kinnison opened her eyes, sat up, and looking at a wall, reached out towards something she could see and I could not, and said, "I'm coming Lord!" She then turned and fixed me with a look that I can only say contained a bit of joy and a bit of challenge. She then lay back down, never to open her eyes again. It was a very holy moment. When my parents returned, they asked if there had been any change. I wasn't ready to share my experience so I said she was awake for a few moments. But at that time I knew that there is a reality on the other side of the wall we call death. She saw it, and was moving towards it in spirit. That experience profoundly changed me and I trace my decision to enter into ministry from that moment where I encountered God in a most profound way.

These holy moments are important for us to keep in our minds when we go through difficult and challenging times. They are reminders that God is with us and loves us. Where have you experienced the Holy? Remember them; hold them close, for they are important.

Unfortunately there are also moments of discouragement. We have had those times when we felt like the disciples at the base of the mountain. Everything we try to do in faith seems to go wrong. We are challenged about our actions; accused of being faithless or, worse, deceitful. We wonder where God is when we really need help. I am sure you can think of those times in your life.

I recall a time early in my ministry where I was having continual run-ins with an individual. It seemed that I could do nothing right in her opinion. She challenged everything. It was getting to the point that I didn't want to go to work and was wondering if I really wanted to be in ministry. I was doing my best but it wasn't acceptable. I began to wonder if everyone in the church felt the way she did. Getting a call from my District Superintendent telling me he had gotten a letter of complaint didn't help much. Things were pretty dark. That was when an older pastor friend stopped by. I shared my discouragement. He smiled and said, "Oh, you are in the tunnel." I looked at him quizzically and he said, "We all go through tunnels of discouragement." Then he said something that stayed with me, "Do you see any light?" When pushed I began to share the positives that were happening in my personal life and in the life of the church. He said, "You have a choice. You can focus on the darkness or see the light that will lead you out of the tunnel." This is in some ways the story of today's scripture. The disciples at the base had not had the current experience of the transfiguration but they had been with Jesus. They had experiences of the light and it was that they needed to focus on. Ultimately I moved beyond that dark time of testing.

As a boy, Robert Louis Stevenson looked out of his window one evening. Those were the days before electric lights. Stevenson saw the town lamplighter coming along. As this lamplighter lit the street lamps in succession, Stevenson was impressed at the sight. He wrote about the lamplighter who went along "punching holes in the darkness." Jesus Christ came into this world as a light, and he punched holes in the darkness.

Jesus is with us. In times of joy, he is there gently reminding us to not get stuck believing this high spot is how it will always be. We do have to go down off the mountain but he will be walking beside us. In times of darkness, Jesus comes challenging us but also, like the lamplighter, Jesus comes punching holes in the darkness. Whether we focus on the darkness or the light; that is the question we have to answer. Both are part of life. Jesus is present in all of it. Thanks be to God for the moments of joy that transform us. Thanks be to God for the light that shines in the darkness. For all but Judas, the nine down at the base of the mountain would go on to fearlessly proclaim the gospel. They would die for their faith. Many even were known for the miracles of healing

they performed. They learned and they grew and the darkness did not win. We are challenged to live as they lived, trusting in God, growing in faith and love so that ultimately the darkness will not win.

So our life of faith is part encouragement and blessing, part challenge and discouragement. We might wish to be the ones on the top of the mountain but sometimes we are relegated to the base of the hill. We give thanks for those mountaintop moments but we need to recall that Jesus is with us, helping us and pointing us to the light even when it feels like nothing but darkness and discouragement. This is not the part of life's journey that we want, but it is reality and we give thanks that God is with us.