

“Wild Wonders”

Luke 9:28-36

We all crave the “wild wonders” of mountaintop experiences though we cannot live there forever in its rarified air. Because of that mountaintop experience Jesus was enabled to act with confidence and power.

The disciples too needed a foretaste, a reminder that they were on the right path with this One upon whom they had hung all their hopes.

The Gospel reading today by Luke is written so that we too like Peter, James and John may be drawn back up the mountain to try to understand the relevance that singular experience has for us who live down on the everyday plain.

We have to start off where Jesus and his disciples started off, at the foot of the mountain, on the road to Jerusalem, the road leading to suffering and death.

We may have mountaintop experiences, but they only exist to move us onward. We pause and rejoice on the mountaintop, but we only grow in the valleys.

In the verses which precede the Story of the Transfiguration in Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus is telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law. He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

In Matthew’s Gospel Peter rebukes him and says, “Never, Lord, this will never happen to you!”

I wonder if this was what Jesus himself hoped in his heart might happen, that somehow there might be a bend in the road for him, a means of escape leading away from Jerusalem so that the awful things which filled his horizon might disappear from view?

Perhaps it was because of such a temptation as this that he turned on Peter and said, “Out of my sight, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”?

That is why it was necessary for these three disciples, the inner circle of the Twelve, needed this transfiguring event. They needed it for courage.

Imagine the despondency and dismay of the disciples as they accompanied Jesus on this road - a journey they had hoped would lead to some kind of victory – to public recognition and acclamation. They had to be overwhelmed and worried about Jesus' prediction of his soon to be death. They needed courage to go on the rest of the way to complete their Mission with their Master.

Maybe their depression began to affect Jesus and made him turn on Peter as he did and tell him in today's jargon to "get lost" because he was putting such temptation in Jesus' mind. Temptation which would have made it difficult for him to concentrate on the task ahead.

Did he wonder how the kingdom of God could come about through apparent failure? How then could Jesus be absolutely sure that he was doing the right thing – doing what God wanted him to do?

In the same way, how can we be sure that we are doing the right thing on our faith journeys - doing what God wants us to do? We can get some clues from what Jesus did next. He took himself off with just a few of his disciples to a quiet place – on the mountain. He retreated...

And there – in that mountain top experience came the very same Voice which had commissioned him at his baptism – with the same words – "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased."

However, there was the important addition of three words, "listen to him."

And this all happened in wild wonder, in the singular presence of two of the greatest figures from Jewish faith history, Moses and Elijah. Both had experienced God speaking to them on mountaintops – Moses on Mount Sinai, and Elijah heard God, not in the wind or the earthquake, but in the still small voice of calm.

As it had been for these two great figures representing the Law and the Prophets, the experience for Jesus was a spiritual mountain peak. He received the affirmation of God which enabled him to walk the way of the cross.

And the disciples, when they had recovered from the shock and the wonder of this close encounter with God must have had their faith in Jesus confirmed when they heard the divine command “listen to him.”

And this is where Luke leads us to enter the story, where we can anticipate a mountaintop experience also. These words “listen to him” are written in the imperfect tense in Greek which indicates *continuous action* – emphasizing the fact that this was not just an isolated occurrence which happened over two thousand years ago, but a command to everyone since then to listen and keep on listening to Jesus.

Sometimes we become so surrounded by the clamor of the everyday world that it is difficult to hear Jesus speak clearly to us. It is then that we need to take ourselves off somewhere so that we can set some time aside to truly listen. Only as we listen are we able to respond, are we reassured that yes, this is the way that God wants us to travel wherever that might lead. We don't have to take up mountain climbing either, it can happen right here in worship, when we come to the Lord's Table. Many years ago, the Presbyterian pastor and Chaplain of the United States Senate, Lloyd John Ogilvie, described in his book *The Cup of Wonder* how that can happen:

Holy Communion is that very special time when we receive Christ. Taking the sacrament is our awesome time to receive Christ's living presence. He is faithful to his promise. He enters our minds so we can think his thoughts; he floods our emotions so we can love each other as he has loved us; he captivates our wills so that we can respond to his guidance; and he penetrates every fibre of our bodies with healing and health. His amazing grace is mediated and we are free to love him, ourselves and each other.

The experience for Jesus on the mount of transfiguration was of a “wild wonder” unexpected and yet needed by Jesus and his three disciples who accompanied him. The experience enabled Jesus to go back into the world to radiate God's glory, to reflect that glory as love.

When we ask that same Jesus to be present through the Holy Spirit and that he make himself known to us in the breaking of the bread is a “wild wonder” unexplainable.

How he makes himself known is something between each one of us and Christ, but if we listen, and keep on listening with anticipation and expectancy then we too shall know intimately the love that will not let us go. We too will be enabled to radiate God's glory, reflecting Christ's love right where it is needed as we descend to the plain and the valleys, away from the euphoria of the mountaintop to involvement with our everyday demands.

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