

We are all on a spiritual journey. The destination of that journey is everlasting life, to be at one with God. During this journey we all pass certain landmarks or guide posts. One of those guideposts is the encounter with God or we could say, the “mountaintop experience.”

Mountains were traditionally places that people went to in order to have an encounter with God. If you have ever been to the top of a mountain you can understand why. You appear to be on the roof of the world with all of God’s creation at your feet. Lofty peaks are encircled by clouds and brush against the heavens. Clouds were thought of as a symbol of God’s presence. Scripture tells us that God resides on mountaintops, and prophets climbed their summits to speak with Him. Even today people who climb mountains will tell you they feel closer to God.

You would think that an encounter with God would be the end of our spiritual journey, that once we found God that’s it we’re done. But that isn’t the case. After we have been to the mountain, after we have encountered God, we must return and help our brothers and sisters. We must help them and encourage them. Strengthen them so that they too can climb the mountain and have their own encounter with the Divine.

The Gospel of Mark can even be read as this type of spiritual journey up a mountain. As we go up one side, we hear about the ministry of Jesus; the miracles, the healings, the feeding of the

thousands, the call of the disciples. The top of the mountain is Peter's declaration, "You are the Christ," and the revelation of Jesus' glory at the Transfiguration. And then, the disciples and Jesus come down the other side of the mountain toward the cross and the difficult days ahead.

The "mountaintop experience" does two things for us, it gives us hope, reassurance, strengthening us to face what lies ahead; and it allows us to minister to others who need our strength and reassurance to continue on their own journey.

This is what happens to Peter at his mountaintop experience.

The veil is lifted and Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son of God. Moses and Elijah represent the law and the prophets, the Old Covenant deferring to the New. And to emphasize the point, the voice of God tells the disciples to listen to Christ.

There is a story in the second book of Kings that helps us to understand what is happening in the Transfiguration. Israel was at war with Syria. Elisha, the prophet of God, used his divinely inspired sight to inform the Israelites of the movements and strategies of the Syrian army. At first the King of Syria thought a spy was responsible, but eventually he learned the truth and sent a vast army of horses and chariots, to capture Elisha. Elisha was in a city called Dothan. During the night the Syrian troops surrounded the city of Dothan.

In the morning Elisha's servant went out and saw the Syrian army camped all around them. Out of fear for the safety of his master he ran to Elisha and cried "Alas, my master, what shall we do?"

And Elisha replied, "fear not, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

If God is for us, who can be against us? And God is for us and with us so completely that He gave us everything.

You can imagine how hard it may have been for the servant to accept this. So Elisha prayed to God, "O Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see."

So the Lord opened the young man's eyes and the servant saw that standing between Elisha and the Syrians were horses and chariots of fire covering the mountainside.

This vision reassured the servant and in the end not only was Elisha safe but the Syrian army was humiliated.

This is the meaning of the Transfiguration.

At this point in His ministry Jesus is very much like Elisha and Peter is very much like the servant. They are surrounded by enemies and Peter is anxious and afraid for the safety of his master. Just before the Transfiguration, Peter professed his belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. And the Lord

tried to prepare His disciples for His inevitable passion, death and resurrection.

But Peter was horrified, “Never will this happen to you,” He said. And Jesus is forced to rebuke his friend. Peter needed reassurance. Like Elisha’s servant Peter needed a mountaintop experience, an encounter with the Divine. Like Abraham, Peter needed to see things from the perspective of God, not men. Peter needed to see that in spite of the death that Jesus was about to undergo, God was still there. God was still in control. God will see to it that in the end Peter and his friends will triumph over their enemies as Elisha triumphed over his. Peter and his fellow disciples needed God to open their eyes and give them a glimpse of the Divine to strengthen them for the difficult days that were opening before them. The Transfiguration, was that experience.

When Peter and James and John saw the glorified Christ, the identity of the “Beloved Son” was revealed. Their fear was dispelled. As Matthew tells us of same incident, Jesus comes to them and tells them, “Get up now, and do not be afraid.” And thus fortified they went out and preached the Gospel to all the world.

But the mountaintop experience, the encounter with God, is not for our sake alone, it is for our brothers and sisters so that they too may be comforted and strengthened.

In 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King delivered a powerful keynote address. It ended with these words.

“We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop....Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain....Mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord.”

Those were his last words to the people that looked to him for hope. The following day he was killed by an assassin’s bullet. But those words were full of assurance and hope. Those words allowed his followers to carry on their struggle even without the person who had brought them so far.

Abraham goes to the mountaintop, passes a test of faith and returns to be the father of a great nation. Muslims, Jews, and Christians all regard him as their spiritual father. Peter is taken up to the top of a mountain by the Lord and shown a vision that prepares him for the struggle ahead and allows him to lead the nascent church.

And what of us? What is our mountaintop experience? Where is it that the Lord our God is revealed to us and we are strengthened to go and love and serve Him? It is right here in this church.

Our own mountaintop experience comes every time we gather for the Eucharist. We hear the word of God proclaimed to us from this very ambo, just as Abraham heard God speaking to him. Here we enter into the presence of God just as Peter did. We experience a

moment of Transfiguration when under the appearance of bread and wine, our Divine Lord is transfigured before our eyes. The assurance of the presence of God comforts us and gives us the strength to fulfill our mission and preach the Gospel to others. All fear and doubt is removed from our hearts and we are given the courage to face the challenges, and trials, sufferings and yes even death that we must pass through before we can fully share in the divine glory.

Suffering is part of every human life, with or without Christ. But with Christ, it is not the end of the story. Our suffering, the crosses we bear, purify us of our selfishness if we allow them to. We learn to lean more and more on Christ, and in so doing we experience a greater share of His wisdom and joy, His resurrection.

The cross and the resurrection are two sides of the same coin, we cannot have one without the other. We must never allow ourselves to think of one without thinking of the other.

This balance between the cross and the resurrection, sorrow and joy, helps make sense out of a lot of confusing aspects of our spiritual life. Since both are necessary for our growth in holiness, God allows us to experience both, with the timing that He deems best.

In the resurrection moments, the mountaintop experiences, God grants us exceptional clarity and satisfaction in our Christian

journey. And as much as we'd like to stay in those moments, we can't. Earth is not Heaven and God loves us too much to allow us to settle for anything less than the fullness of His friendship.

And so He leads us down the mountain, to the difficult days of Calvary and lets us share the weight of His cross. On mountaintops He strengthens our hope, but with crosses He strengthens our love. And we learn to cling to Him more than to His gifts.

This is Christian wisdom, and the best way to grow in wisdom is to work together. Recognize the gifts God has given you and combine them with your interests in ways that help others. The best way for us to get help carrying our crosses is to help others carry theirs. By carrying each other's crosses we combine the joy of Christian charity with the pain of our earthly exile; keeping both in perfect balance, the resurrection and the cross.

In many respects, we live in difficult times. The Church is attacked and seems to go from crisis to crisis. The pandemic has taken exceptional toll on our lives and livelihoods. We don't know when things will get back to normal or even what the new normal will look like.

But why should we fear? We have been to the mountaintop. We have read the book, we have seen the final chapter, we know the end of the story, we win.

