

A Mountaintop Experience; Mark 9:2-9

Rev. Emily Miller

Today in the liturgical calendar is Transfiguration Sunday. It's the Sunday that forms a transition between the season of Epiphany and the season of Lent. We Protestants use this Sunday to re-visit the time when Jesus took 3 of his disciples up to the top of a mountain to reveal to them who he really was. Read Mark 9:2-9. Pray.

Around 50 million years ago, give or take a few years, movements in the Earth's crust caused what we now know as India to crash into what we now know as Asia. In the cataclysm of heat and pressure that followed, the leading edge of India was pushed up and up into a large fold of rock that stretches 1,500 miles long. We call this fold of rock the Himalayan Mountains. In 1856, the tallest peak in the Himalayas was estimated to be 29,002 feet tall, and later, through the modern use of GPS, was corrected to be 29,035 feet tall. In 1865, this tall peak was named Mt. Everest

Ever since its discovery, people have been obsessed with climbing up Everest's icy slopes to have the ultimate mountaintop experience. Now, you might ask yourself- Who is so crazy as to climb 29,000 feet straight up into the air? One of the most famous folks to do this is British climber George Mallory, who tried to climb it, but died on the mountain in 1924. His body wasn't discovered until 1999.

The first team to **reach** the summit was the British Expedition of Edmund Hillary and Tenzig Norgay, who climbed all the way up the North Face on May 29, 1953. They were followed by many others – the first woman to climb Everest, the first solo climber, the first teenager to make it to the top, the first amputee to be successful and the first person to go up without any supplemental oxygen. Hundreds of people have climbed Mt. Everest to achieve that mountaintop experience.

But yet I think this also begs the question- Why? Why in the world would people climb 29,000 feet straight up in the air? George Mallory once famously said, "Because it is there." But a deeper explanation might be that mountain climbing is a test of human endurance and courage, an irresistible adventure, a dangerous mystery, or an experience

that leads to self-transformation and a better understanding of the world. All of these have been given as reasons. Certainly, fixed ropes and better clothing make climbing easier today than in the 1950s, but it is still extremely treacherous. And just to make sure that humans never take her for granted, Mt. Everest has a trick up her sleeve – due to the continuous clash of the Earth’s tectonic plates and the constant accumulation of snow on her summit, Everest gets a little bit higher every year.

It seems to me, though, that if you really look to the heart of why people climb mountains, why people feel a need in their soul to do this treacherous work, the real answer would be more *spiritual* than experiential. Mountains have always been known to mankind as one of the “thin places” in the world, a place where the dividing line between heaven and earth is very *thin*. A thin place is where the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted just a bit and one is able to receive a glimpse of the glory of God. It’s a place where God can actually hear the beating of our hearts, and we can hear his voice. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A mountaintop experience is a *spiritual* one to be sure.

Scripture completely supports this idea of mountains as “thin places.” In our scripture passage for today, we see that when Jesus wants to reveal something special about himself to Peter, James and John, he takes them “up a high mountain.” While up at the top of the mountain, Jesus becomes dazzling white and Elijah and Moses appear and talk to Jesus. Now, if you remember your Old Testament, Elijah and Moses had mountaintop experiences of their own with God. But here, Moses represents the law and Elijah represents the prophets, which encompassed all religious thought before Jesus came. And while they were there at the top of the mountain, there came a voice saying, “This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!”

What a mountaintop experience! I don’t think they come any better than that. Jesus shines like a light from heaven and God calls him “my Son.” This was certainly an epiphany for Peter, James & John – an absolute moment of truth, a spiritual mountaintop experience. Jesus Christ completely revealed to them in all of his glory – make no mistake about it. They trembled; they shook; their jaws dropped; they were amazed!

And then what happened? Just like with all mountaintop experiences, they came back down the mountain.

We'd like to think that Peter, James and John came back down the mountain and were perfect disciples leading perfect lives after that amazing experience with Christ on the mountain. Unfortunately, that's not what happened.

Just shortly after this mountaintop experience, James and John become preoccupied with their own greatness and ask Jesus if they can sit at his right hand and his left hand in the kingdom. Really guys? You just saw on the mountaintop that Jesus is God's son – you think you can be part of that? You think you are equal to Jesus and can sit on his right and his left?

And what about Peter? After his mountaintop experience, I think we all remember what Peter did after Jesus was arrested. He denied even knowing Jesus at all, three times. That's a mountaintop experience for you, you get all caught up in the fun, but when you come back down to real life, it can go right out the window.

Now, I'll bet there is no one here today who has ever climbed Mt. Everest. (If you have, please tell me after the service.) But I know that there are many, many people here today who have had a mountaintop experience of some sort. I hope everyone has. I'm talking about a time when you clearly saw Christ, you really heard his voice, you really felt his presence, you really understood that he is God's Son. These are the kind of experiences, these "mountaintop experiences," that we Christians live for. It could happen in a moment of intense prayer, it could happen when you are in one of those "thin places," it could happen during worship, it could happen in the hospital with your loved one, it could happen in any number of places where you feel close to God.

Or it could happen in a much more loud and extravagant way. I know that quite a few of you went last summer to the Franklin Graham Festival in downtown Pittsburgh. An experience of a lifetime. A multi-million dollar Christian extravaganza. You saw Michel W. Smith in the flesh, international singing sensation; you heard Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, preach the gospel; you were with thousands upon thousands of people who love the Lord; you watched

people to go forward and accept Jesus for the first time; you got all caught up in this incredible wave of spiritual excitement. Friday, Saturday, Sunday – the whole weekend was a mountaintop experience.

And then what happens? You came down off the mountain. You went home. You went to sleep. And you woke up Monday morning, just like you always do, one Christian alone in one bed, no Michael W. Smith, no Franklin Graham, with a whole week ahead of you, full of challenges and temptations and problems. You come down from the mountain, just like Peter and James and John. And what do you do? What do you do after a mountaintop experience?

Well, my friends, that's where the church comes in. The church is the place that sustains us in between our mountaintop experiences. It is the place where we can have our faith renewed and restored, but also the place that can sustain us through all of the mundane days and the valleys in between. This is one of the many reasons why the church is so necessary to Christian life.

We are the church here at the COTC and we have many opportunities to come together. Take our Tuesday night speaker series, for example. We just recently came together and learned about Islam, which is extremely prominent in the world today. Every day you turn on the news and there it is. We learned the basic tenants together and then we talked about Islam together. We weren't worried about being politically correct or hiding our feelings. We asked questions and shared stories about a subject that is extremely difficult for Christians today. We talked, we prayed, we were together, we are the church.

Or how about our fellowship dinners, like the Thanksgiving dinner or the upcoming Easter when we come together to eat, to talk, to laugh, to hear what is going on in each other's lives. We are a family together. We are the church.

Or how about the new Connect prayer service in the chapel. We gather together on an ordinary Tuesday night (the 24th of this month) to pray. We say prayers, we sing prayers, we pray quietly together, we listen to scripture. We give an hour of our time to God to try and sort some things out in our lives. We lift ourselves up in prayer; we lift church members up in prayer; we lift the world up in prayer. We live the in between times together. We are the church.

You see, whenever you get up on that mountain with Jesus and look at Him face to face, it is a precious time that cannot be forgotten. But the rest of the time when you are just living your life at the bottom of the mountain or even deep down in the valley, you need the church. Jesus knew that and that's why he instructed Peter and James and John to go out and form the church, so that Christians throughout the centuries can be sustained together until the day when Jesus returns in his transfigured glory once again.

We are the church. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are the church. For our happy times, our sad ones, and our so-so ones, we are the church. Praise be to God for allowing us to be so. Amen.