

Every year at the end of Epiphany, the Sunday before we begin Lent on Wednesday night, we take the trip up the mountain with Jesus, James, John, and Peter. Jesus' clothes and person became brilliant, and the three disciples saw him with Moses (through whom God gave the Law) and Elijah (considered the greatest of the Prophets). Peter, in his predictable style, had to do something, so he declared, "It's good to be here! Let's make a house for each of you and stay here."

Jesus set him straight, indicating that they must leave the mountain and go to face all sorts of troubles. Every year, Lent starts, and we begin to see the tension between what Jesus taught and what the world will allow. Lent will end with the Cross on Good Friday, with those who should have recognized what God was doing in Jesus - reaching out with love and forgiveness to heal a broken, recalcitrant world - instead seeing only threats to their own ways of doing things.... So they crucified him.

Lent is a time for us to ask for vision, that we may recognize the ways we turn away from Jesus in our every days.... Lent is a time to change the way we do things: to act out of love instead of whatever keeps us from loving.

The Transfiguration story has never been my favorite, but we can see that for Jesus, it must have been a special time of affirmation, to give him strength as he set his face to go toward suffering and death in Jerusalem. There may be comfort for us, too, if we notice that, even though the disciples were given such a special experience, they *still* could not really understand what Jesus had to do... "Let's stay up here," Peter exclaimed.... But the point of the experience seems to have been strength to NOT stay up on the mountain; to go back down to face the rough roads and valleys and trials ahead.

When we think of our lives, the mountaintop experiences are most valuable as they have helped us in tough times. Mountaintop experiences comes in all sorts of shapes and sizes. The rest of this sermon today will be to share a couple, so that we may all perhaps more easily recognize God's work in OUR lives because of their light.

One is small, almost unnoticeable. It happened to me during prayer. I had my long mental list of all the things wrong in the world, all the people needing healing and hope, all the war situations needing an infusion of peace and understanding, all the disasters and economic turmoil, all the things I wanted God to fix.... I tried to lay these things out before God in prayer, when suddenly, I began to imagine how it must be for God, with so many prayers pouring in to God, with so much pain and suffering and loneliness in every quadrant of the world.... We tend to pray as those who want to see results: "Prove yourself, God; fix that." My heart changed, just for a time, and I earnestly wanted to help GOD with all the demands and requests and cries. My prayer changed from, "Fix this, God, please," to "Dear God, how can I help YOU today? Please show me how to love YOU." And I and my day were changed and blessed.

I must tell you that I went back “down the mountain” really fast. I quickly lost sight of “loving God” and started belly-aching about this and that and worrying how I would get all I needed to do done... But for a while, things were different, and I hope to remember that special time and let God guide me by it.

Here’s the point: Special experiences of God are given for a purpose. If you experience one, make sure that you ask the Lord to show you how to let it deepen your walk as God’s child. As you know, the disciples didn’t do so well with this, because even after the high mountain experience, they were quick to compete with each other for the best place in the kingdom and really quick to abandon Jesus when he got into trouble. So mountaintop experiences do not make a person perfect.

A good illustration about letting special time with God make a difference in one’s life came through Carlos Wilton, who related his experience of backpacking with the Boy Scouts to the experience Peter and his companions had up on the mountain with Jesus.

"I can remember, years ago, backpacking with the Boy Scouts on the Appalachian Trail, and going out for hikes at night. On a dark trail our leader told us to turn out our flashlights. Then, we would wait in silence for ten minutes or so, until we had achieved what the leader called 'night vision.' Once we had our night vision, we could walk unaided by any artificial light, picking our way over the rocky trail by starlight and moonlight alone. It was different seeing by the light of the moon and stars after being used to using a flashlight. There was an unreal sense about the path we walked on and the rocks we climbed over. I will never forget how different that world was. To achieve night vision, though, you had to know how to wait. You had to have confidence that the gift of vision would come, in time. And if you could resist for long enough the urge to click on your flashlight, you would be rewarded with this ability to navigate the trails without artificial light. The flashlight would brilliantly illuminate a single point, but would dazzle your eyes so that, if you turned away from the small circle of light, your eyes could not pierce the darkness. Night vision was dim vision, to be sure, but it extended 360 degrees around you. And it was enough.

We have become so accustomed to seeing our world in one way that it is difficult for us to break out of that mode and function by a different reality. The "night vision" image is a good one for those of us who struggle with hard times and perhaps a sense of powerlessness in terms of our world or our prayer times. We tend to offer our prayers as if we were pushing buttons or mixing chemicals--we hope to get that particular effect that we want. Make him well, Lord; Help me do this, God; Give peace to the world, Lord.... The night vision image would seem to fit in better with what we know of the prayer lives of both Moses and Jesus. Moses would go and be in prayer to God for long periods of time. He didn't rush up the mountain for an hour and then zip back with his face red from exertion. He would go and commune with God, for forty days, a long time. He was letting his vision become accustomed to what GOD had for him to see, without anything artificial. Jesus did the same when he was tempted in the wilderness, he gave himself time and space to see what God was offering to him. This type of relating does not come naturally for those of us who are used to flipping a switch to turn on the light to see what

we have come to see. (*Presbynet*)

Whatever our situations, we should pray that our eyes will start to see what it is God has for us to see and that God will provide us with a new perspective. God can change us by allowing us to see and experience a different reality--a bigger house, a larger reality. Life will still be hard; our hearts will break over and over again; but we will become different. people than we are today. This is what Jesus struggled to make the disciples understand, that it was not in the world, but in them that the change would occur. They would learn to respond to the world's evil with good--a slap on the face was not a reason to strike back, but an opportunity to show the power of good in response to evil. The revelation of other people's failures and sins was not a time for condemnation but for the transforming power forgiveness to show a new way for the world.

Writer/preacher Charles Swindoll once found himself with too many commitments in too few days. He got nervous and tense about it. He was snapping at his wife and children, choking down his food at mealtimes, and feeling irritated every time there was an unexpected interruption in his day. He recalls in his book "Stress Fractures" that before long, things around their home started reflecting the pattern of his hurry-up life style. He said the situation was becoming unbearable. Then it happened.

After supper one evening his younger daughter, Colleen, wanted to tell him something important that had happened to her at school that day. She began hurriedly, "Daddy, I wanna tell you somethin' and I'll tell you really fast."

Suddenly realizing her frustration, Swindoll answered, "Honey, you can tell me -- and you don't have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly." He has never forgotten her answer: "Then you listen slowly."

Perhaps if the Transfiguration were to happen today, God would need to tell Peter, James, and John: "This is my Son, listen to him! Slow down. Don't be so quick to move things your way, to shape the world as you see it, Peter. Don't be so quick to climb the corporate ladder, to join the rat pack and be number one, John. Don't try to beat your colleagues to the first position, James. Slow down. My Son is trying to show you another way, another world, another kingdom. If you will listen slowly." (Brett Blair, eSermons.com, February 2001, adapted by FTE.)

The mountain where we are given God's special time is usually not just some retreat away from the rest of life, it is in the midst of life, it very well may be in the worst of circumstances. The mountain is where you find yourself recognizing and sharing God's love in some way that surprises even you. It is a place you learn to care about someone who had always been an outcast in your eyes before. The mountain is where-ever you lose your life so that God can return it to you. It is where you see the same old people and the same old world, in a brand new way.

May the transforming power of God's love touch our lives and help us see and listen SLOWLY as we begin our Lenten journey. AMEN.