

SERMON: What Happens on the Mountain...

TEXT: Luke 9:28-36

Do you remember that feeling from about a week ago? When the sun finally shined after numerous cloudy and rainy days? It seemed like every person you met was celebrating. Breathing a sigh of relief. Walking with a little spring in their step, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from their shoulders. It's amazing the emotional, spiritual, and even physical benefits sunlight provides. It's amazing how clouds and cold and darkness can bring us down.

Have you ever had a mountain-top experience? Maybe, you've literally stood on top of a mountain and seen the breathtaking view that gives you a glimpse of eternity. Or maybe you've been on the mountaintop – in a manner of speaking – with an event or a place or an experience that was extraordinary and awe-inspiring and gave you a new perspective on the world.

The trouble with mountaintop experiences is that they're hard to describe. None of the adjectives you can think of even come close to describing the awe that you felt or the power of the event. If you've ever seen a miracle or participated in a miracle. If you can recall a time when God burst in on your world leaving you with no doubt in your mind of God's existence. If you had a moment that changed

your life or if you received a gift that came at just the right time. All of these could be called mountaintop experiences.

When I visited Israel in 2014, I had a mountaintop experience that I will never forget. It was Sunday, and our group was worshiping with the congregation of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. One of the first things I noticed about this beautiful church was dome ceiling of the sanctuary, bordered by flowing Arabic script. Translated, it read “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace.” It seemed so ironic, but I chose to make it a prayer of hope for this sacred land.

We added about one hundred Presbyterians to this small church that day, and the crowd was standing room only. Bethlehem is in Palestine, and the common language is Arabic. But they kindly translated most of the service for their English-speaking guests. Scriptures were read in both languages. Hymns were sung together, but with both Arabic and English words intertwined, providing a harmony that soared beyond the musical notes. The Lord’s Prayer, also, was prayed aloud, both languages sounding simultaneously.

The most beautiful part of the service was where no language was needed at all. We joined in the universal language of Christians around the world: the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We formed a line with Palestinian brothers and sisters, young and old, waiting to share the bread and the cup, the body and blood of Christ. We stood in solidarity with them. We bowed in prayer with them. We *walked each other home*, if you will.

This was truly a kingdom-of-God moment for me, and, I'm certain, for many others that day. Even though it's hard to express the power of that moment, I am compelled to tell the story over and over again.

Peter, James, and John did not tell anyone about their mountaintop experience with Jesus. Luke wrote, "They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." Furthermore, in both Matthew's and Mark's version of the Transfiguration, Jesus ordered these disciples to tell no one about what they witnessed until after his death and resurrection. There are numerous reasons for their silence, but we can sum it up by adapting that famous Las Vegas promotion: **WHAT HAPPENS ON THE MOUNTAIN... stays on the mountain.**

But my point today, however, is just the opposite. WHAT HAPPENS ON THE MOUNTAIN *must not* stay on the mountain for modern-day disciples of Christ. Jesus has been raised from the dead, and we know that it is incumbent upon us to share all the good news we have about him, wherever we can and as often as we can.

When the sun shines bright on a spring day after a long, dreary winter, we want to coax everyone we meet outside to soak in the warmth and inhale the fresh air and lift our faces to the light.

I am grateful to Shelly Gerard, who has done this for us today, by introducing us to Care Portal. By our participation in this vital mission, we can share the light and love of Jesus with children and families who have been dragged down into a cold and dreary existence by overwhelming struggles in their lives. These are families who are striving to stay together. These are parents who are working to get their children back. These are children who have never had their own bed, never eaten a meal around a table, never known the security of always having enough food in the house.

I've been imagining how heavy that must feel, like days or weeks without sunshine. And then I imagine someone from a church delivering a bed. Or someone paying the water bill to prevent shut-off. Or someone providing a gift card so that all the kids can get new shoes. Or someone who fills your tank with gas so that you can drive to St. Louis to visit your child in the hospital. I imagine it feels the like the sun breaking through the clouds when you've been living in the shadows for so long.

“Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

I'd say the disciples probably became wide awake upon witnessing such a sight! As Jesus was changed, as the ghosts of Moses and Elijah appeared, as the brightness of glory shone around them, it was confusing, to be sure. And it is clear that the disciples didn't understand. I think Peter was attempting to organize his

thoughts as he tried to contain the chaos around him. But at the same time, the event was enlightening, as well. If not for Peter and James and John, then for all the disciples who have come after them. The event of the Transfiguration can be enlightening for us.

One Biblical scholar explained that in the dazzling white of his clothes, “the glory of Jesus shines through this story, illuminating and highlighting his divine nature.... As Jesus was transformed, he was joined by Moses and Elijah, also in great splendor. [Their] presence... and their conversation with Jesus [is] evidence that the Christ had come in fulfillment of Israel’s laws and prophecies.” (Lori Brandt Hale, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 454) Finally, they heard the voice of God from a cloud, declaring in no uncertain terms, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

In his Transfiguration, we understand better who Jesus is. It can be a mountaintop experience for us, just hearing the story told. But it calls for more than just awe and amazement on our part. It calls for us to be changed, as well. Transfigured. Transformed. When we come down from the mountain, we need to share the experience and help others understand better who Jesus is. **WHAT HAPPENS ON THE MOUNTAIN** must not stay on the mountain.

We are called to wake up from our sleepiness and our apathy. To look around and see that our neighbors are overcome by darkness and gloom. To shine the light of love on those places. To give them a glimpse of the kingdom of God. To bring the light and love that Jesus brings.

Out of the clouds, may we hear God speaking to us: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

AMEN.