

**“WHAT IS THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE LORD?”**

Luke 9:28-36

The Sunday right before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent celebrates the Transfiguration of the Lord. You can read about this miraculous event in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke and each account tells of a turning-point in the ministry of Jesus. When you look at verse 31 of our passage from Luke 9 we read that, “they [Moses and Elijah] appeared in glory and were speaking of his [Jesus’] departure, which was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” Of course we know that this departure was Jesus’ crucifixion and ultimate death. Up here on the mountain, Jesus is revealed to Peter, James and John as the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, envisioned as Moses and Elijah. In this event, God’s glory shines in Jesus, and this is an especially important affirmation for us to consider as we look to our times of worship in this upcoming season of Lent. God’s glory shines in Jesus.... You will notice that the colors of the clothes on the pulpit, communion table and lectern are white. Why?

Well, because we are celebrating a festival of the Lord, and especially because it reminds us of the dazzling brightness of Jesus' clothes.

Let me ask you to consider this- **have you ever had a mountain-top experience?** Maybe it has been at a concert that you only dreamed about attending but you are there? Maybe it has been at a Christian camp or conference and it literally changed your life- this has happened to many people growing up going to church or YMCA camp or like some in this sanctuary today, the New Wilmington Mission Conference held on the campus of Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania. Maybe you have participated in a sporting event and your team won or you won a particular individual event. I mean think about all those Olympiads competing and if you are fortunate enough to have the gold medal placed around your neck and your hear your national anthem being played, I mean, that could be a mountain-top experience, right?

How many of you have seen the Oscar-winning movie *Chariots of Fire*?

If you haven't you need to, for this true story is about two athletes in the 1920 Paris Olympics. Harold Abrahams, after a tremendous struggle that was as much against himself as against the other runners he competed against, won the gold medal in the 100 yard dash. Eric Liddell, the devout Christian who refused to run his race on a Sunday, because it was the Sabbath, switched events and won the gold in the 440 yard dash. It is a tremendous story of faith, perseverance and commitment. After the Olympic Games are over, there is this scene where all the athletes representing Great Britain are returning home by train to London, and spilling out excitedly into Waterloo station. All except Harold Abrahams. His girlfriend is there, waiting anxiously as the crowd begins to thin out. Only when they have all gone does Harold slowly emerge off the train. He has done what he went to Paris to accomplish- he won the gold. His medal is in his hand.

Harold had been to the mountain, and he has come to the realization that where he has been and what he has accomplished will never be repeated again. And now he has to come down from the lofty heights and face reality.

The Transfiguration had to have been a mountain-top experience for Peter, James and John, and maybe even for Moses and Elijah. **The Greek word that translates as "transfiguration" is the word *metamorphothe* from which we get our word metamorphosis.** And you biology buff know that a metamorphosis is a transformation, a complete change of appearance and form like when a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. But think about this- Jesus went through not only a metamorphosis on this occasion but at another time. When Jesus left His heavenly home and came to earth to live among us for those 33 years, he took human form and became one of us, and yet, He was still God. And now Jesus will set His eyes on Jerusalem and what eventually awaits Him there- the cross.

And so here we find three of His disciples, Peter, James and John witnessing this unbelievable event where they have a glimpse of the reality that lies just beyond everyday life. And even though Peter wants to put up three tents or, as our passage reads "dwellings" for Jesus, Moses and Elijah in order for them to camp out there for a long while, notice what Jesus does. Look at verse 37 and following for we read, "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.'" And you can read that this child is very ill, even the disciples couldn't cure him and the father approaches Jesus.

Mountain-top experience; terribly ill child- what is reality and who defines it? I mean, is reality nothing more than a concept, as comedian Robin Williams has suggested? Is the mountain-top experience in and of itself the ultimate reality with all of the euphoria of celebration and glimpses of glory? Or is reality the messy, grinding it out of everyday life?

It is the promise and hope of salvation that comes through Christ and the knowledge that one day every tear will be wiped away? Or is it the fears and the pain and the tears that we encounter every day of life?

Today I want to talk about **three places of where life may find you- The Mountain Top, the Valley, and the Plateau.**

First, **The Mountain Top.** It can't get any better than this. I mean Jesus is up on the mountain with His three closest disciples and, lo and behold, there is this metamorphosis where the appearance of Jesus' face changes and His clothes become dazzling white. And who should appear but Moses- the great law-giver and Elijah- the greatest of the prophets. One biblical scholar suggests that Jesus had "gone there to seek the approval of God for the decisive step he was about to take.... It was as if the princes of Israel's life and thought and religion told Jesus to go on." (*The Gospel of Luke*, William Barclay, p. 123)

I mentioned this before and I ask it again- have you ever had a religious mountain-top experience that set your life on a new course? It's as if you could reach out and touch God; the worship has been great; the prayer time with God has brought you so close to Him that you have felt His love in wonderful ways. Those mountain-top experiences are great, if you have ever had them, but those types of experiences are never given for their own sake. Rather they can be a gift from God to equip us, so that when the experience is past, we can be used by God to minister in His name in our broken world.

Look again what it says in verse 37, "On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain,..." This experience was as much for the disciples as it was for Jesus. For this event prepared Him not only for one human tragedy, His death, but for the greatest threat of all- His death and resurrection. Folks, the mountain-top is great but we can't stay up there like Peter was trying to do by building three tents. We have to come down.

Luke tells us that Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah about his departure, which was going to be fulfilled in Jerusalem. Interesting, **the word for "departure" is exodus**. It is believed that Luke wants us to understand this in different ways. **First, it can mean the "exodus" in the Old Testament- departure, going away. Second, it can be used as a euphemism for "death,"** such as when a person says something like, "after I am gone," referring to their own demise. And yet it seems that Luke picked this word, not least connected with Moses, to suggest that in His death, Jesus will enact an event just like the great Exodus from Egypt, but only more spectacular. Think about this- in the first Exodus it was Moses who led the people of Israel out of the bondage and slavery of Egypt and eventually to the Promised Land. And with this new Exodus, Jesus will lead the people of God out of their slavery of sin and despair and death to an eternal home, to a place that has is a promised inheritance- the new creation where the entire world will be redeemed.

And Jesus knew that this mountain top experience would prepare Him to follow where the law and the prophets had been pointing all along, and this is represented by Moses and Elijah, pointing down off the mountain. But where?

The second place is **the Valley**. The Transfiguration experience had prepared Jesus to go down into the valley where there is pain and suffering, and a little boy who is so sick that not even the disciples can heal him. To the valley where demons cry out and people suffer and weep, a place where, as Luke 9:45 says, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands," or as another translation puts it, "handed over to sinners" which means Gentiles. It seems that all of the Gospel writers have the story of the sick boy right after the Transfiguration. And maybe it is because they saw the two going hand-in-hand: the mountain-top experience and the loud-mouth, stubborn demon. Think about this- for those who have spiritual

experiences, for those who encounter the Lord, maybe, just maybe those mountain-top times are balanced with the valleys of this life.

I mean, could not God be preparing us to come down to the valley to be His hands, His arms, His feet, His mind, His heart. Because if we have been on the mountain we are making ourselves available to God, we are more open to God, we experience God and His glory, and we are ready and equipped to come down to the valley and are open and aware of the pain and suffering of people of this world. And so God can use us for His glory; in the valley.

But let me just say **there is a middle place, the Plateau.** There are many who would much rather live their lives on the Plateau where there is neither the mountain-top or the valley. It is a place that could be characterized as, and don't take this the wrong way, undramatic and unexciting. And God does seem to call some people to this kind of life. And yet, as disciples of Christ, if we find ourselves living on the Plateau, that doesn't give us the right to say we can sit back and not engage in ministry,

not reach out to those who are in need, not roll up our sleeves and be involved in Christ's work in this church, this city, this world. Because life is not lived on the mountain-top but in the Plateau and in the Valley. Where do you find yourself in life- the Mountain-top, the Valley or the Plateau? And how are you living out your life where you are located? Like Jesus, Peter, James and John, we all have to come down; down to the valley, to the plateau; we all have to get to work. Amen.

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The Transfiguration...

Have you ever had a mountain-top experience?

*Chariots of Fire...*

The Greek word for *transfiguration* is *metamor-phothe* and our word is

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Three places where life may find you...

First, the \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_

The word for "departure" is \_\_\_\_\_

In the Old Testament-

A euphemism for \_\_\_\_\_

The second place is the \_\_\_\_\_

There is a middle place, the \_\_\_\_\_

Conclusion: Where do you find yourself in life?