

The Mountain Where Jesus' Glory Shines Brightest
Luke 9:28-36

Maybe it's because I grew up in the flat landscape of western Ohio, but I have always been loved the mountains. Their beauty, their grandeur, their overwhelming majesty invoke a sense of the divine within me. I remember most of my encounters with mountains: from climbing Mt. Mondadnock in Vermont when I was in high school to driving up Pike's Peak about a few years ago.

Mountains witness to God's majesty. Climb a mountain and you feel as if you are that much closer to heaven. Often cloud-covered, mountains speak a word of God's mysterious presence, experienced, but never quite completely seen. Mountains witness to God's wondrous creative force. It was from a mountain God gave us the Law by which our lives would find meaning and blessing and purpose, and Moses would climb that mountain and his face would have a divine glow about it.

And even more than us, Bible folks had a special appreciation for hills and mountains, because hills and mountains spoke of God. They didn't believe God lived in the mountains, but they believed that mountains were the footpath that pointed to God's holy habitation in heaven. God is in heaven and we are on earth, but on the mountain, that's where God might just encounter us in a special way, symbolically speaking, of course, but a power symbol nevertheless.

A sampling of psalms evokes a sense of wonder and power and comfort and awe:

*PS 3:4 To the LORD I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill.*

*PS 121:1 I lift up my eyes to the hills--
where does my help come from?*

*PS 121:2 My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.*

*PS 99:9 Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his holy mountain,
for the LORD our God is holy.*

So it comes as no surprise that when the Gospels mention mountains and Jesus, it is not just an accident of geography; it is to say something profound about the interaction of God and Jesus. To put it another way, all of Jesus' life reveals God to us, but when we come to a mountain, we stop and pay close attention.

And even closer attention today, because today on a mountain we see Jesus as we have never seen him before. He is transfigured, one of those words we don't use very often. It means changed, transformed; today Jesus is suddenly bright and shining as the sun, his face shining with a brilliance that lets us know we are witnessing the power of God almighty himself. And on this, the last Sunday of Epiphany, which means revealing, as we celebrate who Jesus really is and what it means for us to share him with the world, we wonder if this might not be the ultimate revealing of Jesus: high on a mountain, glowing with a light divine.

Maybe so, but there have been other mountains in Jesus' life. Recall his temptation, when the

devil took Jesus high up on a mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world. So, this is an important mountain, where Jesus does battle against and emerges victorious over, the Kingdom of evil, of darkness. That's an important mountain, where we learn in Jesus is the power to defeat the devil.

Or the mountain upon which Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. The new law, a new way of living, with mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation at the standing at the center of a new relationship with God, a relationship defined by the heart, not by the law.

Or what of countless unnamed mountains where Jesus goes to pray,? On example, (Luke 6:12) finds Jesus calling his disciples after a night of prayer on a mountain. Now Jesus could have prayed anywhere, but on a mountain we know God is trying to tell us again of how important prayer is not just for Jesus' life but for our lives.

Then again, the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem begins on a mountain, the Mount of Olives. Is this then the mountain where we see Jesus in all his glory: Jesus as the triumphant king praised, worshiped, adored. To know Jesus as the king of our lives. That's worth knowing.

And what about the mountain where Jesus meets his followers after he is risen from the dead? I'll meet you in Galilee he had said, I'll meet you back where you live, I'll meet you back in your regular lives. How good to know that Jesus does not simply rise from the dead and leave us behind; no the Risen Lord is a part of our lives right on.

All these mountains are the setting for profound insights into Jesus: the one who does battle with the Kingdom of Evil, the one who prays, the one who gives a new kind of law, the one who is a king to be worshiped, the one who continues to speak to our lives after he is exalted from death to life.

And our mountain today. Could it be where Jesus' most profound meaning is most fully revealed? Who is this Jesus? Just before this, Jesus has fed thousands of people, and then he has asked "Who do you say that I am?" Peter had given the answer: "You are the Christ," God's specially anointed one, to bring to pass God's kingdom. And Jesus had spoken that he would die and three days later rise from the dead, but the disciples did not yet comprehend all this. And he has told them, and us that being a follower means to take up our own daily crosses, of love, sacrifice, service.

And now, eight days later, Jesus is with Peter, James, and John, on a mountain. Jesus, as usual is praying. And as Jesus prays, his face begins to glow with this divine fire, and suddenly Moses, who gave God's law, and Elijah, perhaps God's mightiest prophet, are with Jesus, talking about Jesus' departure, in Greek, actually Exodus.

As Moses had delivered the people from bondage in Egypt and brought them to the promised Land, as Elijah had delivered the people from false gods, so now Jesus will have a special mission to accomplish, to deliver us from bondage to sin and death.

You get the sense that Peter and the rest, don't quite understand all of this. Luke is unclear: they're overcome with sleep, and yet they're awake. . . sort of nodding off, if you will, sort of as it is sometimes twenty minutes into a sermon! But when they fully come to , they see Moses and Elijah standing there. Peter wants to build three altars. He does not yet know that Jesus' power far outweighs the power of even Moses and even Elijah. He just doesn't yet understand.

And then it becomes obvious that Jesus is the one, unique son of God. Again a voice hidden in mystery from a cloud: This is my beloved son: listen to HIM. And interesting concept: we often find it much easier to believe in Jesus than to listen to Jesus. Because then we get all tied up with being merciful and forgiving and embracing our enemies, and it can all get to be a bit much. But I digress.

And for a moment we think that on this mountain the disciples finally know all they need to know about Jesus: he shines with the power of God Himself; he is greater than the greatest hero, Moses, Israel has ever known and shines brighter than Moses ever did; he is greater than the greatest prophet, Elijah, Israel has ever known. He shines, radiant, unique.

But Jesus says, (in other Gospels) keep this to yourselves. Shocking. Surprising. Finally, he has been fully revealed, has he not? The one who can feed a multitude, the one who gives sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, and life to the dead. The one who on a mountain shines with a God-given and God-revealing brilliance, who on this mountain shines brighter even than Moses and Elijah, yet is still not fully revealed. So keep this to yourselves, Jesus commands.

The disciples must have wondered. What is left to be revealed about Jesus? They might even have thought about all those other mountains: where Jesus defeats the devil, where Jesus has offered a new sort of law, where Jesus has proclaimed the power of prayer.

And now, Jesus shining brighter than all the rest on still another mountain. . . what more could possibly be revealed?

And perhaps that's why Jesus told them to keep this to themselves, until the day would come when they would finally realize that the ultimate power of Jesus has not yet been revealed, not on the mountain where he has defeated the devil or offered a new law or prayed through the night.

Nor have they yet experienced the power of Jesus in all his glory when they see him feed thousands and not even on this mountain when he shines with such a fire divine.

No, even on this mountain Jesus' ultimate glory has not yet been revealed. And so the disciples are asked to keep quiet, until the day will come that at last they understand: the ultimate power of Jesus has not yet been revealed here today on this mountain of Transfiguration; his ultimate power will finally be revealed on another mountain, more of a hill, actually, called Calvary.

A hill far away, upon which stands an old rugged cross. A cross which speaks of divine love and sacrifice. A cross which speaks of forgiveness and reconciliation. A cross which meant death for

Jesus and life for us.

His greatest power will be found, not on the mountain today, with his face transfigured and shining, but on a cross with his body broken and the skies darkened in grief.

Today Jesus shines brightly. But he is fully revealed, not on this mountain of power and light, but on the mountain upon which will stand his cross. And may we understand that as we dare pick up a cross of mercy and forgiveness ourselves, and follow him that Jesus can shine brightly again today. And so finally, It's not just on a mountain that Jesus can shine: his glory is revealed again and again, in your life and mine, as we listen to him, follow him, and make his ways ours. Amen.