

AIN'T NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: Exodus 34:29-35,

Luke 9:28-36

The Winter Olympics have started again with stunning opening ceremonies dampened, of course, by the death of the young Georgian luge racer, Narda Kumaritashvili. It's going to be a fascinating couple of weeks now with these athletes competing in outdoor games from alpine skiing to hockey to speed skating.

Every Olympics the Opening Ceremonies seem like they can't get any more spectacular. After Torino I thought nothing could top Pavarotti singing *Nessun Dorma* with a full orchestra, finished off by fireworks. And then came Beijing with thousands of choreographed dancers, and synchronized waves of human movement... followed by fireworks. And now Vancouver, with its dazzling laser light show and dancing Aboriginal tribes, followed by fireworks. You watch the parade of the world's athletes coming out carrying the flags of the nations, and sometimes you think there really can be peace on earth.

Each one of these opening ceremonies is like a mountaintop experience more spectacular than the last, and each one leaves you cheering and hopeful and awestruck... followed by fireworks.

There are two mountaintop experiences in today's lessons, quite literally mountain tops, one Mt. Sinai, and the other Mt. Tabor... but no fireworks.

In the first mountain story, from Exodus, Moses has left the people Israel at the base camp and has climbed Sinai alone to meet God there; the God who has led Israel out of slavery, a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. It is a memorable meeting. The Liberator of Israel stands before Israel's Liberator and begs to see God's face. Yet it is more than he can bear.

God tells Moses to turn away, and God will pass by; but when God does, God shoves Moses into the cleft of a rock and covers his eyes, like pulling a child back from the yellow strip on the subway platform when the train arrives. Better to live to see the back end of the train passing by than to die standing too close when it approaches.

In this encounter, Moses' own face becomes luminous. In fact, he shone so brilliantly that the people who saw him afterward were startled and wanted to know if that didn't hurt, he was so burned and radiant. Something of God got on him. So Moses took a veil and threw it over his head so as not to frighten his own people.

The other story is the story of Jesus on Mt. Tabor, the story of the Transfiguration. It took place early in Jesus' public ministry but not until after he had empowered the Twelve to go out to the countryside and heal diseases and cast out demons and declare

that the kingdom of God was at hand. He had fed five thousand people and he had invited his followers to deny themselves, take up a cross, and follow him.

Eight days later, Luke says, Jesus went to Mt. Tabor with Peter, John and James, so that Jesus could observe a little spiritual retreat. When they got to the summit, Jesus went off by himself and prayed while Peter, John and James caught a catnap.

For Luke, the disciples taking a nap when important things are happening is a sign of faithlessness. Later, you'll remember, the disciples are sleeping in the garden of Gethsemane, while Jesus prays through the night of his arrest. Luke is describing the disciples in this story as not the brightest bulbs in the chandelier. Because as the three in the inner circle wake from sleep they are stunned to see Jesus transfigured in brilliant array, dazzling like the sun, his face shining like Moses' face that day on Sinai.

And speaking of Moses, there he was so out of place from so long ago standing with Jesus and with Elijah as well. Good things come in threes on mountaintops I guess!

Still shaking off the sleep, Peter tried to mumble something helpful and observant like, "Gee, it's really great that we're here to see this. Maybe we should build three little chapels. One for you, Master, and one for Elijah and one for Moses. And we can always remember today's important events because this is something we really mustn't forget. Maybe you all could hold it there for a second while I grab my Nikon and I'll grab a picture for posterity."

But before the words had slipped out of Peter's crowded mouth what with his foot in there already with all the words, God's voice silenced all the others, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" And Voila! After that voice was heard, Jesus was alone, and the disciples were left standing there with their hands in their pockets fiddling with their change.

Luke concludes the story not with fireworks but with a closing comment about the disciples, "They kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." Which is an understatement really.

Nowhere in the gospels, or in the Book of Acts, Luke's sequel, do the disciples say anything about this experience. The fourth gospel, John's gospel, does not even mention it. And only 2 Peter 1, makes any reference to it in any way, and it is considered to be of dubious authorship.

I don't know about you but I am left wondering what it is about this experience that leaves them so speechless aside from the impression that the Transfiguration could only be reproduced by the likes of Industrial Light and Magic or the special effects crew of *Avatar*. One commentator, Alan Culpepper, goes so far as to say that, "The implication is that the disciples were not transformed by this mountaintop experience."¹

And yet, I wonder if that is not to say too much. There are, after all, occasions in life when words fail. When you experience something so important that all there is to do is fall silent.

I have been at the bedside of a number of people at the time of their death. And with the exception of the words that are said in love and affection, sometimes words of farewell or of devotion, there is not a lot to say at the passing of a life. In fact, unlike the cry of life quickening when a child comes into the world, the opposite is often the case as life leaves, and most of what I have found is that the most eloquent comfort to those who are dying is not expressed in words but in touch, not in speech but in quiet presence. There are some occasions in life, after all, when words fail.

A week ago I went to a concert at St. James Church on Madison Avenue. St. James Church is a beautiful and awe inspiring place in and of itself, with a gorgeous altar Reredos designed by Ralph Adams Cram, gold leaf and polychrome figures depict a resurrected Christ and attendant disciples.

The music of the evening was the Fauré Requiem. And it was beautifully done with a fine orchestra accompanying. At the appropriate moment in the performance the choir was seated in the loft and a soprano soloist came forward to sing the *Piè Jesu*.

It was flawlessly done with such glorious clarity and passion that when it was over one sat breathless, transported into a deep, rich, place in the heart where comment or movement would have ruined it. For a moment the audience became a congregation and we all held our breath until the conductor dropped his arms and we breathed again. There are some occasions in life when words fail.

And I wonder if being there on Mt. Tabor for Peter and John and James might have been something like that. A moment so powerful, and yet so poignant, that Luke describes it as luminous, like that state of contemplative attentiveness when you first wake up and you are not yet sure what day it is or where you are, or whether you are still sleeping or waking.

They kept silent, Luke says, *and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.*

Maybe they couldn't put it into words. Maybe it was not something that needed words but that inspired action instead. Sometimes the high moments are meant for that, to inspire what comes next, which is why these moments we steal away for the peace and renewing of our soul are so treasured.

We shouldn't be too quick to come down from the mountain. Our lives are so full, what with the job and the kids and the weekends and the dance lessons and the yoga class and getting to the gym and walking the dog and traveling to Beijing on Monday and back on Wednesday and the Blackberry keeping us in constant contact.

If nothing else I would urge you to give yourself one hour a week, here, without the constant tyranny of the vibrating Blackberry. To make of this one hour of church a mountaintop experience, where the music and the quiet and the peacefulness of the place and the scripture take you closer to God without worrying about the world, just for one hour. More and more I see people fiddling with their Blackberry in worship, and I know they are not talking to God.

We shouldn't be too quick to come down from the mountain. We might just see God there.

But we cannot stay there forever, build booths, or stay fixed on what we have seen of God there. The next story that Luke tells in the gospel is the story of a crowd that met Jesus and the three apostles at the foot of the mountain as they descended. A man in the crowd begged Jesus to come and have a look at his son, because he was suffering seizures and no one seemed able to help him. The man had even asked Jesus' disciples to heal the boy, but they were unable to do so.

And Jesus, in a fit of frustration wrung his hands and said, "Oh faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you and put up with this?" And immediately Jesus cast out the unclean spirit and restored the boy to health.

From the mountaintop they immediately engaged the world, because that's the rhythm of life. You cannot stay in either place too long, the mountain or the valley. To borrow a phrase from the Supremes, "There ain't no mountain high enough" to keep us from re-engaging life, inspired by what we have seen in the better moments. We are meant to experience life in both places, and if we are attentive, to meet God in *both* places. Life keeps moving on, after all, demanding us to go where it takes us.

In a matter of a few verses, Jesus commissions seventy disciples to go forward and bear the tidings of his kingdom and of its dawning. And they do. And when they come back, they return in joy, saying, "Lord in your name even the demons submit to us." And Jesus blessed them saying, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For many desired to see it, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." And I'm not sure which he was describing more, what the three saw on Mt. Tabor, or what the disciples wrought in the valley below as they rubbed elbows with those to whom they were sent.

Jesus pushed his disciples to re-engage the world. It was not enough to see him in glory, he knew that it was also imperative that they go forth in his name, healing, teaching, preaching, demonstrating the love and power of God in the world until the world itself is transfigured.

Maybe the disciples never spoke of the transfiguration because they were so busy transforming the world with the hope of the gospel and the healing of its wounds that they didn't need to *speak* of it again because they *lived* it again and again every day.

How do you see God in the world, transforming the everyday into the glory of his radiant being? I think sometimes you see it as people line up for ashes placed on the forehead, and when people share a bologna sandwich with the homeless men who find shelter here; you see it. You see it the lessons taught by teachers in our church school who give up their Sunday mornings to teach little ones the faith, and you see it in there among the seniors who have lunch in the South Wing each weekday whose only social contact are the folks with whom they and where they break bread and meet here. You see it in the stirring of a sleeping child when the waters of baptism touch her forehead, and

hear it in the loud crying of an autistic child in the lobby whose teacher patiently waits out the episode with firm but reassuring understanding. You see it in the beauty and mystery of the Lord's Supper and the counseling provided a man from the neighborhood whose rent is due and whose money has run out.

Jim Wallis, the founder of Sojourners has said, "In Jesus, God hits the street." If we are going to seek God in the mountaintop experiences of the quiet prayer and the glorious sunset and the spiritual retreat and the holiness of the Lord's table; then we should know that God also meets us in the everyday encounters of office and home and work and play where God hits the streets in the presence of Christ transforming and transfiguring the world.

This week we begin the 40 day journey to Easter, believe it or not. Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, and we remember that in Jesus God hits the streets of everyday life and common experience. That whether we are on the mountaintop spiritually, or whether we are dealing with the weary, busy, exhausting routines of every day, God meets us in the midst of them.

Not all of life is mountaintop, nor is all of life mundane or deadening to the spirit, either. But for those who are able to keep awake and pay attention, the Lord is present, and what we see is transfigured before us into the very likeness of God. Then we know what it is to see what many have longed to see but did not see, and hear what many have longed to hear but did not hear.

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¹ Alan Culpepper, Luke. **The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes**, Vol. IX. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 207.