

## A MESSAGE FROM A MOUNTAINTOP

Luke 9:28-36

One of the most awesome events recorded in the entire New Testament and one of the relatively few “Jesus” stories recorded in all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), is the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist had just been beheaded. And Jesus’ earthly life was drawing to a close. Jesus’ teachings about his approaching death coupled with all the weird events that kept happening, seemed to the disciples, absolutely sinister. They felt like they needed a break from all this turmoil – maybe a vacation ... a week at the beach ... or maybe ... maybe the disciples needed some mountain time. It was quite a jolt when Jesus spoke so plainly about what lay ahead. This wasn’t a time for cute parables or riddles. Jesus had told them that he would, “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” The disciples were both shocked and confused. This wasn’t what they thought would happen when they decided to drop everything to follow Jesus. So when Jesus asked his inner circle, his closest friends, (Peter, James and John) to go with him up the mountain, they were ready to go. Perhaps the higher air would enable them to think more clearly.

There was no way the disciples could have prepared for what would take place on that particular mountain. They saw a sudden change come over Jesus. He appeared in a brilliant light. As Luke tells the story, “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them.” The disciples knew Jesus was special, but they had never experienced anything like this. Jesus was “transfigured” right in front of them.

As if this weren’t enough, they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Moses, you recall, gave the people the Ten Commandments (the Law) and led them to the Promised Land. Elijah was the prophet who was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. The Jewish people believed that Elijah would return one day in the same way he departed, on the wings of a chariot. These two men represented the Law and the Prophets, the two most important sources of authority in Jewish life.

Now here's the first point of the morning's sermon: *There are times when God suddenly breaks into our lives.* The confused disciples were given a preview of what was to come. They were given a glimpse of what the future held. At that very special moment they saw an amazing sight: a combination of earth and heaven, time and eternity.

Peter, never at a loss for words, was suddenly at a loss for words. All he could do was mutter meaninglessly, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let's make three little houses – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." In Mark's account, the Evangelist adds (I think with a knowing grin on his face), "for Peter did not know what to say. The disciples were absolutely terrified." Such "mountaintop experiences" are rare, but they do happen.

I had such an experience once. It was on a mountaintop in Berchtesgaden, Germany. I was with Art and Jack. We three Presbyterian Chaplains were conducting a spiritual retreat for Presbyterian servicemen and their families stationed in Germany. On an "afternoon off" from the retreat, the three of us went skiing at one of those magnificent ski resorts which shares borders with both Germany and Austria. It had been a fantastic afternoon. Now, we were back in the car carefully negotiating curves and U-turns down one of the steepest mountains I had ever seen. (My best recollection is that it was an 18% grade). Just then, without warning, the brakes went out – and I mean out. Art pumped the brakes mightily, then pulled on the hand brake – nothing. Then he tried to shift into a lower gear – only a merciless grinding resulted as the gear failed to catch. Then Art uttered the most sincere two-syllable prayer I've ever heard. The words he used didn't really sound like a prayer - but it was a prayer. And what it meant was, "Lord, I'm utterly helpless. It's now up to you."

We had very quickly gained speed to about 30 mph. About 50 yards ahead of us, around a sharp curve, was a bus filled with German friends we hadn't met yet. To our right was a sheer cliff dropping off about 3,000 feet to the valley below. To our left was a snowy bank generously covered with large pine trees. Those were the choices. Art says he doesn't even remember making the decision – maybe he didn't. In any case, in what I call the miracle moment, he whipped the car to the left, now going about 40 mph, aiming at the snowy bank, between two large pine trees. The next moments were a blur for all three of us, but

presently we all (I was in the back seat which had no seat belts) found ourselves standing outside the wreckage totally silent except for saying to each other, “You okay ... yeah ... you okay ... yeah ... you okay?” That was the day Art and Jack and I found conclusive evidence that God is, indeed, a Presbyterian.

This was now the second time God had spared my life from an accident while going down a steep mountain. And lest you should be tempted to think, “Man, he doesn’t learn very fast, does he?” let me hasten to add that I wasn’t driving either time.

As I stood there dazed, but safe, I “heard” a voice from a mountaintop. Someone told me as clearly as though the words had been spoken into my ear: “I’m giving your life back to you. But be careful with it; it’s really my life, you know.”

Sometimes God breaks into our lives suddenly and distinctly. And if that happens to you, count on it, your perspective will be changed.

Now, let’s go back to the mountaintop and pick up on our story. The disciples are actually and unbelievably there – with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Peter is amazed, and frightened and inspired. No sooner has Peter put his foot in his mouth than Moses and Elijah disappear. One moment Jesus is talking with them and the very next moment they are gone. Now the disciples are alone with Jesus. Then a cloud appears. (The Jewish people often associated God with a cloud, remembering how God led the ancient Israelites in a cloud through the desert). Now the voice of God thunders from the cloud, “This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him.’

At that moment Peter heard what he didn’t want to hear. Peter had rebuked Jesus earlier when Jesus had spoken of his suffering and death. But now God was saying to Peter, “Listen to him.” Peter didn’t want to listen – not to news of Jesus’ death. This was an awful truth he did not want to confront but now he knew he must. There are some truths that necessarily mean change.

Have you ever been confronted with a message that made you know you had to make some accommodations ... that caused you to

know you had no choice but to change your choices? Sometimes God breaks into our lives and we are changed, whether we want to be or not.

This brings me to the last point I want to make: *mountaintop experiences prepare us for life back down in the valley*. The time came for Jesus and his three disciples to come down off the mountain. As Peter, James and John descended the mountain they pondered the significance of what had just happened. My guess is that they walked back down in silence – they were too filled with awe and wonder to say very much. As they walked together, Jesus instructed them not to tell anyone of their recent experience, “until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead”. The time would come when they would be instructed to tell everyone, but the time wasn’t right yet. Jesus and the disciples still had work to do before that. This mountaintop experience played a major role in the lives of these three disciples. However brief the experience was they were given a glimpse of the future. And those who have seen the future are better prepared to live in the present.

Former American hostage Terry Anderson recalls a time before he was captured by guerillas in Beirut, Lebanon. For some reason he felt drawn to an old church. It was the fall of 1984. Terry and his fiancée, Madeleine, were visiting her father in Sunderland, England. Terry looked forward to some peace and quiet from his hectic career as a journalist. He was so dispirited that it took him some days to settle down even in the pleasant atmosphere of this English hamlet. As he walked through the streets with Madeleine, inhaling the crisp air, he noticed a church steeple outlined against the pale blue sky. Terry had been brought up in the church but had drifted so far from God that now, in his own words, he considered himself an agnostic. That afternoon he wondered why the little church had captured his attention. In a few days he decided to talk back over to the church. He opened the heavy oaken door, stepped in and sat down in a well-worn pew. Looking up at the altar and cross which were gleaming in the shadows, he suddenly had a strong sense of coming home. He knew that was where he belonged. Terry Anderson reaffirmed his faith that day in the silence of that sacred space.

For the next six months, Terry wondered why he was drawn to that church. He thought perhaps God was calling him to do something – but what? He sensed he was beginning to have a closer “walk” with God,

**when one morning on a street in Beirut he was shoved at gunpoint into the back of a green Mercedes. His face was pressed to the floor and a blanket thrown over him as the car accelerated. The date was March 16, 1985. While in captivity, Terry began reading the Bible. The Bible came to life for him, and he began to know its characters as living beings. Terry Anderson found the strength to endure years of captivity because he knew God was with him. His mountaintop experience in that little English church was preparation for what lay ahead.**

**“And Jesus was transfigured before them ...” What a difference that made to the three disciples who witnessed the event and what a difference that can make to us, for God will almost certainly break into our lives someday, and probably when we least expect it. When that happens, our perspective will be changed. Do you know why? Because God knows we don’t live most of our lives on the mountaintop. We live them mostly down in the valley – where we find those sometimes dull and mundane “deserts”, dry as dust. And when we also experience those shocks of grief and pain so deadly that we just know we can’t stand it. Then, just when we need it most, comes a voice from the mountaintop that tells us, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to Him!”**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen.**