

February 3, 2008 Transfiguration Sunday
Exodus 24:12-18 2 Peter 1:16-21 Matthew 17:1-9

We are going to take a hike this morning. We are heading for a climb. How many of you have climbed a mountain? One of the bluffs around the Platte or Missouri Rivers? It is not easy.

Every Tuesday, when I worked at a summer camp in the Colorado Rockies, was hike day. Everyone hiked, but we gave several options: from a shorter trip to a lake ... all the way to the big hike, 14 miles round trip, up to the top of Eagle Peak. It became a peer pressure rite of passage, even with our warnings about how tough a climb it was, kids would flock to that hike.

One ascent sticks out for me, still today. It was Confirmation week and we had a huge group wanting to go, around 60. The other piece was that there were a handful of campers, who really did not want to be there and worked hard to resist everything we counselors did to get them excited about a week a camp. So, figure that this difficult group decided they wanted to hike Eagle.

After a half mile, one young man, Dave, began slowing down and bringing up the rear. He started talking about wanting to turn back ... his feet hurt ... and other excuses. So, myself and another counselor started bantering, coaxing,

and talking with him and the group that started forming around us. He grumbled a lot and tried to make more excuses, but we managed to get him half way. With a snack in him, and the peak visible, he started thinking he could make it ... his attitude started changing, he actually jumped up when we said it was time to go.

I have never seen anything like it ... it was the second toughest stretch of the hike ... the trail literally goes at a 45-60 degree angle, straight up through trees to a ridge. It was one of the hottest days of the summer and many more of the kids started struggling, but Dave started chants and camp songs (the very ones he was sitting with his arms crossed through the night before), and took over our job of motivating the youth up the mountain. Then a younger camper, tiny girl started feeling light headed. She got over-heated and had to sit down. I was assessing the situation, when Dave came pushing up from behind, wanting to know what had happened. As soon as he took it all in, ... didn't even know the girl ... they were as different as night and day, ... but he whipped off his bandana, poured water on it to put around her neck and cool her down, then said he would personally be her hiking partner, until they reached the top.

A glimpse of God's transfiguring power ... service above self ...the witness of the potential and confidence for what could be, through Dave; moved us on together, up the mountain.

Jesus is inviting us up the mountain, taking us with him to glimpse another transfiguration full of power and potential. A title, I stumbled across, captures our hike well, "New players, in an old story"¹. The teacher was describing the disciples and Jesus, as they made their way up the mountain, but now it describes us too.

As Jesus took Peter and James and John up a high mountain, by themselves ... the experience had to of started feeling familiar, a bit like déjà vu. The hike would have been strangely familiar, but progressively become weird, eerie, and downright scary. The further they went, the more it followed the footsteps of Moses, when he took Joshua up on the mountain to encounter God. In that story, only Moses truly knew what that encounter was like. The elders and Joshua witnessed Moses walk into the cloud and then the glory of God surrounded him like an all consuming fire and Moses spent 40 days in the midst of this, while the people watched from afar.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=2/3/2008# by Audrey West

Knowing this story, the disciples followed Jesus up that mountain, not at all clear about what they would encounter.

I think sometimes, in our attempt to make God accessible, approachable ... a God of love, we tend to so personify and water down God, there is no mystery or awe or healthy wariness leftover. I think Jesus is part of the problem. In the old, old story ... God couldn't be pinned down, yet we got glimpses. God was described as a pillar of cloud, a rock, a burning bush, a Good Shepherd, a seeker of justice, a jealous husband, and a still small voice out of a whirlwind to Elijah. Within our grasp, yet bigger than we can imagine.

Then God came to us in the flesh, a human man. The disciples were following a man they knew for a couple years now. They ate with him. Saw him heal and care for people. They understood Jesus as a rabbi who could open the scriptures to them, but also a prophet, who spoke with authority, forgave sins, and challenged the religious authorities in the pursuit of justice and lifting up the lowly. They knew he was important, a man sent from God and maybe even as important as Moses, because of the hike they were taking, ... Peter had even just declared Jesus as the Messiah, but when Jesus described what that meant, Peter back pedaled. So, on that journey, they didn't suspect Jesus for more than what they had seen so far. What they feared, echoed

from that old story and pointed to a possible encounter with God, who thunders and rolls in with thick clouds and visions of glory. The disciples knew that not everyone survived these encounters.

As they reach the top of the mountain, breathing hard, probably looking down at their feet to keep from tripping, the blaze of light takes them by surprise. When they look up in fear, anticipating the face of God, there is Jesus, yet in a way more brilliant and radiant than they can comprehend. But, not just Jesus, but the ones they had been listening to their whole lives, from the scriptures: Moses and Elijah. Moses, who God recruited to deliver and save God's people ... the one who came as an answer to their ancestors' prayers and helped them escape their bondage and oppression. Moses, the voice and sign of God's salvation and God's deep desire to rescue people and bring them to a new life.

And Elijah, the prophet ... the one predicted to return and prepare for the Messiah's coming. But, Elijah's presence also pointed to the complications and difficulties that the people of God had in living with their freedom. Elijah's voice challenged, revealed their sin, and commanded that the people of Israel turn around and return to the Lord their God. Seeing Elijah, spoke of the people's sinfulness and God's determination to stick with them, even when

their actions took them into exile. This God wants reconciliation and has hope for all people.

These disciples are being swept up in a new revelation of this old story and in Jesus, see a glimpse of this God; a God of salvation and a God, who will not give up on his people. This is strange. Not possible. Was it the high altitude? Dehydration?

Peter doesn't think so. Moses, Elijah, and he's pretty sure the glory of God just flashed in, through, and around his beloved teacher in a way that spoke of something old and new. He just needs more time to think, to process, to digest all of this and find words for what just happened. So, Peter stammers, "This is good. It is good to be here, to witness this. Let me put up a tent, no three tents, like the tabernacle Moses built for God. We can stay here together ..."

As he's talking, he is interrupted. More of the old story is coming to life, ... a bright cloud descends ... on one hand the mystery and power of God will not be contained or explained away ... and on the other hand, God has already made a dwelling place on earth in Jesus. God gives those gathered on the

mountain a glimpse of this glorious gift, then prevents their attempts to explain it by speaking, "This is my Son. Listen to him!"

It was always the challenge of being a camp up on a mountain, actually it is the challenge with all these kinds of glimpses of glory or encounters of transformation. We counselors wanted to hold onto many of our campers and not let them descend back to the challenges of their day-to-day lives. We saw what catching a glimpse of Christ's light did for them and we were afraid it would get blown out or clouded over by the weight of the world down below. Not much faith on our part.

God seemed to believe this glimpse of Jesus' glory on the mountain would be enough for the disciples, to sustain them through the most difficult days of their life ahead, the road to Jerusalem and the cross.

You and I are turning now, toward our Lenten pilgrimage down the mountain and to the cross. We are new players in an old story. Like the disciples, God sends with us Moses and Elijah, signs of "God's deep desire to save us, as well as his deep, deep faithfulness in sticking with his saved people despite our ongoing struggles, doubts, and even outright failures. [During this Lenten

season] when we remember both Jesus' sacrifice and our own sinfulness, this is a timely gospel reminder as to the gracious nature of our great God.”²

But, God also sends with us Jesus, his beloved Son, the light of the world and the Word made flesh. Dwell deeply in what Jesus has to say to you, during these 40 days through the wilderness to the cross. This encounter with God will reveal glimpses of his glory to guide your way. But, beware! You cannot take this way and remain the same. Jesus' word will challenge us to rediscover our meaning and center in Him. It will require us to leave a lot of the baggage we are carrying, behind. Your priorities will shift and your old way of being will die. But, unlike the disciples, you know this old story of death and resurrection will lead you into a new way of life.

² <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/index.php>, “This Week in Preaching” for Feb. 3, 2008