“MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCES”

Have you ever been to the top of a mountain where it seems like you can see forever? Have you ever been to the top of a mountain and seen its sweeping beauty? You stand there and slowly rotate for 360 degrees, and no matter in which direction you look, you see pure beauty surrounding you? It is truly an awesome experience, regardless of which mountain you are on or how many times you get to experience it.

When I first started skiing in the Rocky Mountains at Beaver Creek or Winter Park, I would get up in the mountains and get so engrossed in how beautiful the scenery was that I would forget about getting down that mountain in a safe manner. When I took trips up to the top of Pikes Peak, it was that same sense of being awed by the experience. There are certain places in this world where it seems as if you can see forever. You can see visions of beauty in an unforgettable way, 360 degrees of pure beauty.

There are not only mountaintop experiences that happen on actual mountains; but there are what are called “mountaintop religious experiences.” These are those special times when you see with utmost clarity who God is. When there is no fog, no haze, no trees, no obstructions, and there for a moment, in that mountaintop religious experience, you see with utter clarity a vision of who God really is. You know for sure that the vision is true.

In the Bible, the fundamental mountaintop experience in the Old Testament is called a “theophany.” “Theo” meaning God in the Greek language; “epiphany” meaning revelation.

On the mountaintop, Moses saw this revelation of God. Moses
was on a mountain: the mountain was named Mount Sinai; and there were ominous black clouds swirling around the mountain. There was flashing lightening, and the thunder was growling. In the lightning and the thundering, Moses was talking with God. When Moses came down from the mountain, it was like Moses’ faith shone like the sun. His face was shining like the sun because Moses had had this mountaintop experience. Moses walked down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the moral law for the human race. Moses had had this vision. He saw with utter clarity the moral law for the earth.

If Moses was on the mountain in the Old Testament, the New Testament also has a mountain top story and the report of a mountaintop experience. On the mountaintop, a person sees with utter clarity the truth about God. In the New Testament, this mountaintop is called the Transfiguration. It is the mountaintop story for today.

Peter, James, and John were up on a mountain, Mount Tabor, an 1800 feet high mountain, not far from the village of Nazareth. They were up on the top of that mountain, and they too had been on the top of that mountain for six days and six nights. Then, as with Moses, a cloud came around them and in that moment, that exotic moment, in the theophany, in the special and sacred moment in their life, they heard the voice of God say, “This is my beloved Son, Jesus, listen to him.” And they knew it was a rare moment, an exotic moment; they believed that God had spoken. They knew it for sure.

While on that mountain, the eyes of the disciples were dazzled with visionary ecstasy. Jesus was transfigured before them. He was utterly changed before their eyes. Transfigured. Transformed. The Greek word is “metamorphosis.” “Meta” means change; “moris” means form. Jesus’ form
was totally changed…Like a cocoon is transfigured into a butterfly. Like a flower bulb is transfigured into a lovely spring daffodil. Where the human Jesus of Nazareth was transfigured into this divine Christ of Glory. And on this mountaintop, the disciples had a vision and in that vision, they could truly see who Jesus really was. The Son of God. The very Presence of God in divine form. Glorious. Bright. A dazzling shining light. Like an angel.

Remember: all of this is a vision. Are you remembering that? The gospel of Luke says that “when they went down from the mountain, Jesus said for his disciples to tell no one this vision.” This is a vision. This is not history. This is not a historical episode that I could tell everyone about.

In this vision, there was Moses, the great lawgiver of the Old Testament, the founder of the universal law of the Ten Commandments. In this vision, there was Elijah, and he was the greatest of the Jewish prophets. The Law and the Prophets, which were the two divisions of the Jewish Old Testament: all Jews knew about the Law and the Prophets.

Peter was also there, and Peter saw Jesus sparkling. Peter saw Jesus’ face glistening and radiantly bright like the sun. Peter was there to see it all, and we like Peter being there because Peter often said the wrong thing at the right time. Peter had “foot in mouth” disease and we like Peter having “foot in mouth” disease because we often have that same problem as well. Peter said something stupid like, “I have a good idea. I will build three tents. One for Jesus; One for Moses; and one for Elijah.” He implied, “Let’s make this experience last a little longer.” Suddenly a voice thundered from heaven, saying, “This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him.” This is my Son who is greater than all the laws of the Old Testament. This is my Son who is greater than all of the prophets of
the Old Testament. This is my Son, Jesus, the Son of God. Listen to him. He is the voice of God for you. Don’t center your attention on the laws of the Old Testament. Far more important than the laws of the Old Testament and far more important than the prophets of the Old Testament, is the importance of my Son, Jesus. Listen to him.

Suddenly, it was all gone. The vision was all gone. And there was Jesus.

Visions. Visions are those rare moments in life when there is no fog, no haze, no trees, no obstructions, where you clearly see the truth about God and the truth about Jesus Christ. In 2 Corinthians we heard again the reference to Moses who had to put a veil over his face “to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory” and the veil that remained over the people when Moses was read, “a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.”…”And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” We see clearly, without a veil or anything obstructing our vision for the truth of Christ in all His glory!

Perhaps the heart of this for us is that we all have the desire to experience transfiguration here and now, regardless of the terminology we choose to use. In the end, we want a sense of the transcendent, the numinous, something outside ourselves that is the cause for awe and wonder. Whether we call it spiritual or religious, there is a need to know transfiguration in our lives.

That’s what Peter wants, right? He probably doesn’t actually want to keep Jesus and his friends in tents forever. Peter wants to capture the experience. He wants to capture the feeling.
Transfiguration matters, it seems. It’s not just a convenient event to mark the Sunday that bridges Epiphany and Lent. It’s not just a bizarre story that might cause some Christians embarrassment.

We need transfiguration.

What if we take Jesus out of the picture? Then we realize that this story is not just Jesus’ revelation of his glory but the fact that what we wish for is our own sense of glory. Not in a narcissistic, look at me, kind of way. But a recognition of the deep human need for transformation, change, conversion, makeover, alteration, metamorphosis. We need transfiguration as much as Jesus needed to be transfigured.

In the Bible, in our story of Christ, in the liturgy of the church, the Transfiguration is a turning point, a transition from one way of seeing Jesus to another. It’s not just about securing the Jesus of the future or holding on to the Jesus of the past but points to the real human struggle with change, with transformation.

Transformation is hard. Change is hard. Traveling from one place to another, from one way of being to another? It’s easier to stay the same. Stay the course. Convince yourself that what you’ve always known is satisfactory and sufficient even when you have glimpsed what could be. So we just sit and wait. We wait. For what? The right time? The right place? All our questions answered? Everything figured out? All those so-called “ducks in a row?”

This is why the transfiguration rocks. It just shows up. There is no right time. It just happens. Now what? No amount of planning can predict the right kind of change. No amount of preparation can prepare you for an altered reality or an altered perspective. No amount of strategizing can make you ready for a transfiguration to be truly a transfiguration.
So, if Peter’s issue is not so much about holding Jesus to his expectations or capturing the moment, do you think it could be that Peter’s issue is the realization that if Jesus changes, then Peter will be changed as well?!?!?

“I cannot be the same. I will also be transfigured, transformed. and maybe I don’t want that. So, let’s pitch some tents, keep things the way they are, hunker down, and ride it out. Maybe the whole thing will just pass by. I can come out of my tent and all will still be the same. Jesus will be the same. I will still be the same.”

So that’s why the Transfiguration. Jesus gets this. What will it be that gets you to move, to come out of your tent, or maybe not even want to pitch one in the first place?

Tents are not just about shelter. They repel the forces of nature. They keep out that which might harm. They keep as much in as they keep out. And Transfiguration could rip our tents into shreds.

Transfiguration means change. We think we welcome change, But when it actually happens, we adopt stances of resistance and rejection. Or convince ourselves that the change can wait. That it really isn’t necessary. That he time is not right. That the problems that will happen are not worth the result of living into who we really are.

Transfiguration means a new way of seeing the world. And replac- ing the lenses of our lives is a lot more complicated that picking out new fashion- able frames. Because at the heart of the matter is that transfiguration not only signals change, but alters life’s direction. It certainly did for Jesus. And when that happens, well, no tent in the world is going to give you the security you think you want or need. Because when we shore up the shelters that protect us from harm we also run the risk of keeping out that which is so very, very good.

What change is Jesus asking you to make in your life to bring you closer to him? As we walk this path from transfiguration to Lent to Easter how is he calling you to be transformed?