

“The Mountain Top Experience”

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Mark 9: 2-10

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The Transfiguration is one of the seminal moments of the Gospel. Biblical scholars and theologians count the Transfiguration as one of the 5 major milestones in the narrative of Jesus, the others being the baptism, the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension.

This story takes place near the end of Jesus' ministry, and in this story, Jesus takes three of his closest disciples, Peter, James, and John, and brings them up a very high mountain to pray. Once they are there, Jesus himself is transformed, and begins shining light. In that moment the disciples see Christ's true divinity – they see Christ's true form, and they experience firsthand the glory of God. Then they see Moses and Elijah standing and chatting with Jesus. The image of the three of them standing together is powerful – Moses representing the law of the Old Testament, Elijah representing the prophecy of the Old Testament, and Jesus the promise of the prophecy coming true.

Peter, not knowing what to say, suggests that they build three shelters, when suddenly a large cloud envelops them, and they hear the voice of God say, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” And then it's all over. Jesus is back to normal, and they walk down the mountain. Jesus tells them not to say anything to the others, until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. They kept everything to themselves, but didn't quite know what this whole “rising from the dead” meant.

There are two major themes from the story of the Transfiguration that I'd like to talk about today: The first is the “Mountain Top Experience”, and the second is “Change.”

Living a Christian life, and following Jesus, is a life of mountain top experiences, and valleys. You have your ups and downs. The Mountain Top experiences are those very rare times when you feel the strong presence of God all around you. You feel incredible love surround you, and happiness wells up and overflows, and for a moment everything in the world makes beautiful sense and everything is at peace. You know that God is right beside you, because you can feel his presence and his loving embrace. They are rare. I know that some of you have had mountain top experiences, and they are wonderful, but they never last. You must come back down the mountain. Peter wanted to stay, and offered to build

shelters, but before he knew it, the experience was over, and they were heading back down the mountain, back down to reality.

But here's the thing – yes you must return to reality, but the Mountain Top Experience stays with you, and changes you, and prepares you for what awaits down in the valley.

I've had a couple of mountain top experiences in my life, but I'd like to share one in particular. About a year ago our church was offering a course on Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho Tutu's "The Book of Forgiving". This caught my attention right away, because there were two individuals in my life that I was having a very difficult time forgiving.

About four years ago I decided to seek the nomination for the Federal Liberal Party here in Leeds-Grenville. It was an exciting time! I loved the cut and thrust of Federal politics, meeting people, organizing events, participating in debates ... I really loved it, and I was filled with excitement. But my bosses were not. My direct manager and the business unit leader decided that my decision to enter politics was a sign that my heart wasn't with the company anymore, and they conspired to force me out. For the next year and a half, I was put under intense scrutiny at work. There were false allegations, long and intense meetings with HR, (Human Resources) often descending into yelling matches, and overall, they created a very toxic work environment for me. Try as they did, they didn't succeed in pushing me out, but I was forced to fight for my job and career on a daily basis. Near the very end, shortly before the nomination event, the CEO of my company came to my rescue, and transferred me to a different department.

A few weeks later, I came second place in the nomination, and my campaign came to an end. I was in a new job, in a new department that didn't require nearly as much travel. My new boss was nice, and liked hearing about my political adventure. She saw politics as a civic duty, not as a threat to the company. It was like walking out of jail or walking away at the end of a war ... suddenly everything was calm.

But it wasn't over for me. I had a lot of trouble letting this go, as everywhere I went, these two individuals stayed with me in my mind. I was constantly replaying heated conversations in my head; I was very quick to anger; and anytime something happened to me, if I spilt my coffee, or if someone wronged me in some minor way, I would become livid with anger, and my mind would immediately return to my former bosses. I knew that this wasn't healthy. I knew that I somehow had to forgive them, but I didn't know how. This was hard, because I felt strongly that they got off lightly, and that they should be punished for what they did to me.

This lasted for about two years. So, when this study on forgiving came up, I got myself a copy of the book. I didn't join the book study group that the church was doing. I did this on my own, and followed the exercise. I got myself a journal and did all of the writing exercise, and carried around a rock – early in the book it tells you to find a rock in the wilderness, and to carry it with you. I even took the book, the journal, and the rock on business trips with me, and would do the writing exercise over breakfasts and dinners. As I read through this book, I finally started to understand what forgiveness truly is. There was a scene in the book where it describes Nelson Mandela leaving prison. He'd been in prison for 27 years, and for about 40 years prior to that, he experienced firsthand the brutalities of apartheid and institutional racism that was rampant South Africa. And as he walked away from that jail, he had a choice to make. In his words, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." I could relate to that quote, because I realized that by holding onto the hatred and anger that I had, I was in prison.

When I completed the book, I was able to forgive my old bosses, and to let them go. And I took my rock (just as the book told me to), and I brought it down to the river, to return it to the wilderness – symbolic of letting go of the anger and bitterness. I was standing at the water's edge at St Lawrence Park, looking at the closest island, wondering if I could hit it with my throw – I used to play baseball and had a good throwing arm in my day. I threw the rock as far as I could. It didn't even make it half way, before plopping in the water. I laughed out loud! This is when the mountain top experience happened for me. I felt happy, and loved, and I felt the strong presence of God all around me. I felt that Jesus was right beside me, smiling and laughing with me. He was laughing at my throw, but I also felt that he was happy and proud of me for forgiving my two former bosses. It only lasted a few moments, but in those few moments I was changed.

Ellie noticed the change in me right away. She noticed that I wasn't angry anymore, that I was happy again. I was myself again.

That brings me to the second theme of the story of the Transfiguration, and that's the theme of Change. The word Transfiguration literally means change – it's a derivative of the word "transform". When you follow Christ, you change. When you have a Mountain Top Experience, you change. And when you go back down the mountain, back into reality, you're a different person, one that's able to meet the challenges that life brings.

It goes further than that, because Christ is the Lord of change – in this story, Christ himself was changed, but more than that, he was about to change the world! The disciples had really no idea what they were in for as they came back down the mountain. They were in for hard times ahead, but they had been touched by God, and Christ was preparing and equipping them to get through those tough times, and to emerge as victors and champions of love.

And I know that many of you have had challenging times. Many of you have walked through the dark valleys of life, and have experienced deep pain and loss. Certainly, right now, we are in challenging times in our society. There's been resurgence of racist hate groups, and not just in the US. On a weekly basis, we're hearing of men in positions of power harassing and abusing younger women around them. We've made progress in our society, but when you hear and see these things, and when we experience our own personal difficult times, it can be hard to stay positive.

February is Black History Month. And when I think about the dark valleys of life, there's no better example than Martin Luther King Jr. We think that these white supremacist marches today are bad - and don't get me wrong, they are bad - but they're not as bad as they were in the 1960's. When Martin Luther King was leading the Civil Rights Movement, his protests and civil actions were peaceful, and yet they were met with violence. His followers were beaten by mobs as police stood and watched, and many times joined in. They were hosed down with fire hoses, and attacked and mauled by police dogs all over the US. Yet Martin Luther King kept preaching his peaceful message – his dream where people would be judged not by the colour of their skin, or their religion or gender, but by the quality of their character. And he dreamed of an age when all people would live together in harmony.

He gave his last sermon on the evening of April 3rd, 1968, the day before he was shot and killed. In that speech he said, "I don't know what's going to happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody I would like to live a long life. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. And I want to tell you tonight, that we as a people will get to the promised land."

Martin Luther King had been to the mountaintop. He had been touched by God, and he had been changed. He went through very difficult

times, but throughout it all he knew that God was with him, and that God's promise is real.

Mountain Top experiences are real, they are wonderful, but they never last. You must come down from the mountain, back into the valley, back into reality. But that mountain top experience helps you in the valley because it changes you, and prepares you for what's ahead. It's a powerful affirmation that the promised land is real, that the love of God is real, and that he is with you.

Let me close by saying that some of you may not have had a mountain top experience. If you have not — don't stress. That's okay. But if you want to, all you have to do is to ask. Ask Christ in prayer. Tell him that you want a deeper relationship with him. Read the scriptures, study them, ask questions. Come to Church. Talk to the ministers. If you open yourself to Christ and allow him into your life, slowly he will change you. And one day he will take you up that mountain.

Amen.