

Sermon for 14 February 2010- Last Epiphany – St. Francis

A mountain top religious experience – this term is used by many to describe times when God is clearly present in the moment, in the world around them. These are the experiences that so many of us long for. Several here today might testify that they have had such an experience. It may have come during a youth church camp or during a retreat. For many of us this may have happened during a particularly moving service or special event such as Baptism or Confirmation. It may have come following long moments of deep despair during which the light of hope broke clearly into view. For others it may remain a longed for life event. Still even those who claim not to have had a direct mountain top experience yet have benefited from others sharing their story of such an experience.

Both the excerpts from Luke and from Exodus are about two of the most famous and spectacular mountain top experiences – Moses receiving the Ten Commandments and the event we call the Transfiguration. At the Transfiguration, Moses, now long deceased, returns to a mountain top and in this incredible encounter, Peter, James, and John watch in amazement as their teacher, Jesus is transformed to reveal that he is indeed the glorious Son of God. They see Elijah with Moses suddenly appearing among them and talking with their teacher. They hear God’s own voice proclaim, “This is my Son, my Chosen: Listen to him.” And what is Peter’s famous response to this extraordinary mountain top experience? He is so overwhelmed that he begins babbling about building booths for Jesus and his legendary companions.

Even in the midst of the terrifying experience, Peter longs to hold on to the moment. He desperately wants to freeze frame life right then and there and linger in this miraculous place. Who wouldn’t? All the glimmers of insight he has had about this man Jesus for whom he has given up so much to follow are now confirmed. Now there is no doubt he is in the presence of the Divine – God’s own Son. The first century Palestinian equivalent of “High Fives all around!” “Can I choose them or what?” must race through his mind. Remember Peter was always an exuberant disciple. But remaining there is not an option. All too soon the divine cloud is lifted, Moses and Elijah disappear, and Jesus’ everyday apparel reappears.

Now they are climbing back down that steep mountain and choosing to tell no one. On the other side of the mountain this might have seemed like an impossible choice. But when they hit bottomland, both literally and figuratively, they are hurled back into their everyday lives of crowds, arguing religious leaders, and hurting people desperate for their attention. Their mountain top experience becomes a distant memory and a dimly understood revelation. Just 10 verses later the disciples are arguing amongst themselves, “Who of us is the greatest?” The moment of the Divine encounter had become their personal possession. Now it is being used for self promotion rather than for the Divine declaration. How easily they forget the glory of God and how quickly they grasp for glory for themselves.

In the events that follow, the memory of this mountain top experience continues to fade. All too soon they are in Jerusalem. Before he can stop himself Peter is denying Jesus. Indeed, their decision not to tell about their mountain top experience until after the resurrection is as much prophecy as it is preference. For it is only after their recognition of and acknowledgement of their own failings and weaknesses that the disciples begin to grasp the full meaning of the Transfiguration. For only then can that dazzling light break through their despair and darkness; glimpses of being in that rarified mountain air return and the story is told again and again just as for centuries the story of Moses receiving the 10 Commandments is told over and over by our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Repeating the signs, remembering the revelation are all important in our faith journey. Yet, even the most disciplined followers will have to contend with people and events that pull them away from ongoing awareness of God at work in their lives. Even when we are being deliberate in practicing our faith we encounter the crowds, the arguing religious leaders and hurting people desperate for our attention. We cannot freeze frame life. We cannot remain on the mountain top. And we dare not leave Jesus behind there in a booth. No, we are called to go forth recounting and remembering. To do that we must take the experience of the Divine into our very being.

Many of you may know that our Wednesday night Bible study has been reading and discussing C. S. Lewis’ Screwtape Letters. More of you are probably familiar with his well-known series of books the *Chronicles of Narnia*. In the fourth book of that series a girl named Jill who is the same age as some of our St. Francis youth is called out of her world into the mystical land above Narnia. There she finds herself at the top of a mountain

ten times taller than any mountain in her world. More amazingly, she is talking to the lion, Aslan. Aslan has called her there to perform a special task. To do this task she must remember Four Signs. As Aslan begins to send her away from the mountain he admonishes her “...remember, remember, remember the Signs. Say them to yourself when you wake in the morning and when you lie down at night. And whenever strange things may happen to you. Let nothing turn your mind from following the Signs. And secondly, I give you a warning. Here on the mountain I have spoken to you clearly; I will not often do so down in Narnia. Here on the mountain, the air is clear and your mind is clear; as you drop down into Narnia, the air will thicken. Take great care that it does not confuse your mind. And the Signs which you learned here will not look at all as you expect them to look, when you meet them there. That is why it is so important to know them by heart and pay no attention to appearances. Remember the Signs and believe the Signs. Nothing else matters.”

Just as Jill is admonished, we are called to remember and to repeat the experiences of our faith. Each of us is called to this task. This is no small task. Keep in mind only **three** of the twelve disciples were with Jesus on that mountain top. But by retelling the story, sharing the experience first, the other disciples then the larger crowd of early followers, and the millions of followers today have visited that mountain top and heard the voice of God declare: This is my Son, My Chosen: Listen to him.



