

“Mountain High or Valley Low”

Matthew 17:1-9

Best-selling author, Peter Jenkins, has written of the night he was first found by Christ. He was attending a huge revival meeting in Alabama. “I didn’t understand all that these people were saying about what had just happened between God and me,” he recalled. “Born again...,” “Saved...,” “The Lord led you here tonight...,” “Praise the Lord...,” “Well, God’s finally got you away from the Devil...,” “Isn’t God good?” were words that Peter heard that night. In using those words, he said, it “seemed as normal in their vocabulary as ‘taxes,’ ‘commute,’ and ‘weekend’ were to my family and friends in New York and Connecticut.”

Mary, the woman who had first counseled with Peter about his encounter with Christ, found him again. “She stared at me with probing eyes,” Peter recalled. “Peter,” Mary began, “this great elation that you’re feeling now... At this moment it may seem like these great feelings are going to last forever, but they won’t. Being a Christian is not based on feelings. You’re on a mountain top now, but someday, sooner or later, you’ll be far away from these great feelings. You may even wonder if all this ever happened. Your Christian walk is based on faith, not feelings.” Later, Peter reflected, “I was so thrilled that there could be good feelings mixed in with faith that I really didn’t care about her opinions at that time. But, many years have passed since that night. I was on a mountain top. The feelings lasted a long time, but that mountain top hasn’t lasted all these years. Maybe I’ve been on more mountain tops than some, but I’ve also climbed, sometimes crawled, out of some awfully deep valleys, too.”

In our lesson from the Gospel According to Matthew, this morning, Jesus and three of his Disciples, Peter, James, and John are on a mountain top. The three are drawn by Jesus into an incredible encounter with God. It is a profound “Mountain-top” experience that

they will never forget. Yet, as this passage will go on to point out, the very next day they will be back in the valley below dealing with the pains of humanity. Even there, though, they will be encountered by God's power. Mountain High's and Valley Low's; one is not better than the other, for God encounters us in both places in our lives. Each one has its place in our walk of faith. So, let's talk about mountains and valleys for a few moments this morning, and let's begin with the Mountain tops.

God encounters us on the mountaintop. Jesus takes Peter, and James, and John, with him and leads them up a high mountain, by themselves. There they will be away from the crowds that are always pushing in upon them. There on the high mountain they will have time for prayer and reflection.

As they watch, Jesus' appearance suddenly changes. He is transfigured before their very eyes. His face shines like the sun, and his clothes become dazzling white." The spellbound disciples look on in disbelief as they see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Peter is so caught up in the moment he wants to build Rosh Hashanah style dwellings so that they can all remain on the mountaintop and prolong the wonder as long as possible. Who could blame him? This is the high point in his personal walk of faith to this time. Anyone who has ever been on a spiritual mountaintop can sympathize.

Kathleen Barrett, writing for the Upper Room devotional guide, shares this, "I used to be angry most of the time. Store clerks were often rude to me, but I attributed it to the notion that they weren't getting paid enough." After Kathleen invited Christ into her life, it seemed that the whole world changed. "Store clerks became nicer," she wrote. "The Sun shone brighter; birds chirped more cheerily, flowers bloomed more beautifully. Of course, I thought the world had changed. I didn't realize

until a few years later that it was I who had been changing. I was different; I had softened. It wasn't the store clerks who had become friendlier; I had. The Sun didn't really shine any brighter, I was just more aware of it. Birds had chirped when I had been in a grumpy mood, but more than likely, they had only annoyed me then. And, of course, the flowers had always bloomed, but I hadn't noticed their sweet fragrance, or appreciated a peach-colored rose opening its delicate petals to the Sun. I changed when Jesus came into my life. And he continues to change me today."

I wish that each of us could experience and maintain that kind of mountaintop joy. For most of us, though, the mountaintop is a sometime thing; perhaps a once-upon-a-time, long-ago thing. Yet, it is not a bad thing to descend from the mountaintop of God's encounter with us into daily living. For it is in the rest of our walk of faith that we meet the world for which Christ died, and where we meet God's power unleashed in love. And that leads us to the valleys.

For, perhaps most often, God encounters us in the valley low. Pastor and writer Fredrick Buechner recalls one valley in his life when God broke through in an unexpected way. He writes, "I remember sitting parked by the roadside once, terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family." As he was sitting there, he began praying. "I asked God for some evidence that my plaintiff cries were getting through." Suddenly, Buechner noticed a passing car that seemed to come from nowhere. "My message from God, the evidence I most needed to see at that moment, was found on that car's license plate. [The license plate] bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then. The word was 'TRUST'."

Was that experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us occasionally? Was it just a coincidence that at the precise moment he most needed to see that word, it broke into his existence? Or, was it the word of God? Buechner writes, "I am willing to believe that maybe it was any one of those things or all of them. But, for me, it was an epiphany." The owner of that car turned out to be a trust officer at a local bank. He is also a Christian. After reading of the incident somewhere, the trust officer paid a personal visit to Buechner. He presented Buechner with the license plate that bore the word that he had so desperately needed to see that day, TRUST. Buechner placed that license plate on a bookshelf where it serves to remind him of his trust in God. "It is rusty around the edges and a little battered," he writes, "and it is as holy a relic as I have ever seen."

All of us who have ever met God in the valley know how life-restoring the experience is. The important point is that we are not to feel guilty if we are going through a period in life when there are more valleys than mountaintops. There are some folks who have the mistaken notion that a perpetual smile is a sign of authentic faith. Not true! The joy of the Christian life is an inner assurance that wears well both on the mountaintop and in the valley. As Mary said to Peter Jenkins, the Christian walk is a faith, not a feeling. It is an eternal truth, not a glib testimony. The God of the mountaintop is also the God of the valley.

Just here, though, is the most important thing to catch from our passage this morning. And, it's this: It is the change in us, rather than the place for us that makes God's encounter mean something. It is that quality of the change that takes place in our lives as a result of God's encounter with us that is most important; not where the encounter takes place. While Peter is speaking to Jesus about building dwellings and staying on the mountain, a bright cloud overshadows them. Suddenly, they hear the voice of God confirming that Jesus is indeed

“the Son of the living God.” The voice challenges them to “listen to him.” This would be a transforming moment for Peter. Years later, when he is one of the great Apostles, he will retell this experience with Jesus. In his second letter, Peter writes this, “We ourselves heard this voice come from Heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.” (II Peter 1:16-18)

Much more is yet to happen to Jesus and the disciples, as we now begin the journey toward the Cross. But it is in part because of this incident that Peter and the others will be forever changed. This is a decisive, transforming moment in their lives, when true change begins to happen. When we are met by Jesus and accept or renew the challenge to be his disciples, our lives start changing from the inside out. It is that change in us, Mountain high or Valley Low, that gives the encounter its real meaning.

The season of Epiphany ends now, as it began at the Baptism of Our Lord, with the voice of God speaking divine confirmation to Jesus. Now, Jesus and the three disciples make their way down the mountain, where they will continue to be encountered by God through Jesus. Mountain High or Valley Low, whatever point you may be at in your life, God is seeking you and will find you.