

Transfiguration at the Top
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From reading scripture, one might think walking up and down mountains is a pretty straightforward practice. It seems that folks are always going to the tops of mountains to pray, seek solace or inspiration, or in this case, appear to their followers as the truly divine. In fact, there are over 500 references to mountaintops in the Bible. Some of them are short enough jaunts, like the Mount of Olives, Mount Tabor, and Eremeos, the Mount of Beatitudes, yet many others are long, treacherous and remote climbs. Mount Sinai stands at nearly 7,000 feet, and Mount Hermon, the sacred northern boundary of the Promised Land, is about the same height, snow-covered for most of the year.

The Reverend Dr. Cheryl Lindsay challenges us to realize that, in her words, *The brevity of the gospel narratives often gives the impression that things happen like magic. One moment, Jesus and the disciples are doing one thing, then Jesus decides to go to the mountain to pray, invites his frequent trio to join him, and ascends to the top without delay or toil.*

We don't know where the Transfiguration took place. Some scholars debate that it may have been Mount Tabor or Mount Hermon, while others assert that it really doesn't matter... What matters is the presence of the divine. Given the sheer magnitude of the moment, I can't imagine it was a small mountain, and, again, quoting Dr. Lindsay, *while the story is full of miraculous occurrences, there is nothing to suggest they levitated or magically appeared on top. They had to make that trek up on foot and could also look forward to the return trip down. Neither would have been easy.*

In all of the ways we've celebrated the transfiguration today, through music, through our readings, and through our children's moment, we marvel at the awe of Jesus, appearing in his most perfect form, true divinity...or in other words, doing exactly what he was born to do, affirmed by God. It's an amazing image, and to fully appreciate its majesty, I believe we also have to embrace the whole experience. The climb is certainly tough, but the journey to the top of the mountain starts way before the trailhead. For Jesus, the journey included being tested and tempted in the wilderness, rejected in his own hometown, pushing to recruit a band of disciples and traveling through foreign lands, performing acts of salvation, healing and generosity, building his ministry from the ground up.

At the start of the service, I challenged us to hold those joyfully colored ribbons in our hands, reflecting on that moment when we stood on top of a literal or figurative mountain, knowing deep in our hearts and souls that we were living the life we were born to live. Now, I ask that we think about the path we had to take to get there. What brought us to the mountain? What inspired us to start climbing, and most of all, what whispered in our ear that we should love the process?

For me, it was a very real mountain. Glacier Peak, in the North Cascades. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before, and the path to it certainly was anything but easy. It stands 10,500 feet above

the Pacific Northwest, and in the case of the route our group took, it required roped traverse over...you know...glaciers, like its name, and packs that weighed over 60 pounds when we started out. The climb was challenging, especially for a group of novice mountaineers. At one point, we postholed through two feet of unexpected snow all day long. Transformative...also, unpleasant.

Standing on the top was a moment beyond measure. I still so clearly remember the sense of accomplishment, the pride of adding my name to the summit register, and the sense that I had come further than I ever could have imagined. My journey did not start at the trailhead...it started much lower.

In my second year of college, I was adrift. I lacked both the motivation and the discipline to make the most of an experimental, self-directed college like Hampshire, and so I found other things to do with my time. Our hall was a well-bonded group of individuals who were so comfortable with each other that we all came back for a second year. We formed an identity, but it wasn't rooted in our academic best interest. When one of my friends returned from the summer with a fake ID, we decided we would rebel against the school's progressive nature by committing to the most normal, anti-Hampshire thing we could think of - the celebration of 30 pack Thursday, complete with a wall of beer cans on prominent display, just to show what anti-rebellious rebels we truly were. The problem was that, in the absence of discipline and judgement, 30-pack Thursday grabbed ahold of our 19-year old brains, and took vicious hold. We soon added 30-pack Tuesday, and then why-not Wednesday, and after that...well...it was the weekend. By December, Monday was the only day we weren't drunk, and we didn't realize just how out of control the situation was. Right before winter break, we found ourselves "celebrating" one last time, and ended up waking up in the morning surrounded by scattered flour and paprika, left over from a chicken frying endeavor, broken glass, and a hallmate who locked themselves in their room, so fearful of our late night rampage that they never again regained trust in us, nor spoke to some of us again.

At that point, I had no idea who I was, but I knew it wasn't who I had become. I viewed myself as an outdoor lover, and outdoor leader, but nothing in my current state of being remotely honored that. I committed to leaving school after the next semester and wrote a field study scholarship to pursue a National Outdoor Leadership School course, and spent the summer, plus several additional months getting myself into whatever physical and mental shape I could to at least have a chance of success. Standing on top of that mountain was proof to myself that I could break through what was dragging me down...I could be the person God called me to be, and I could be a person in whom God just might find a reason to be well pleased. The following 26 years have been a reminder that standing on that mountain isn't mission accomplished, it is a temporary state, a glimpse of what is possible, but not without continued work, and a few more sinful stumbles along the way.

Indeed, if the power of the transfiguration reminds us that we are called to stand with Christ on the mountaintop, reveling in the power of his divinity, the onset of Lent brings us back down again, symbolizing our individual commitment to the discipline we need if we want to follow in

the path of Jesus. As the transfiguration unfolded, Simon Peter, known for speaking and acting before thinking, had a simple suggestion...let's stay here. Let's make the glory our home. We can run down and get some tents for you and your prophet friends and...

And..

And.. the commanding voice of God reminded him that the state of glory he witnessed was for Jesus, and Jesus alone, and while the mountain provided a temporary glimpse of restoration and reflection, human nature is the landslide that will bring us down.

Indeed, he would be building something, but not a simple tent...If he wants the glory, he'll help construct a movement of justice and radical love, not lounging in exaltation at the top of the mountain, but forging a path to Jerusalem, complete with struggle, and sacrifice.

And so, down they came.

Today, we celebrate the colorful awe of recognizing Emmanuel, God with us, and celebrate, we should. The brilliance of the transfiguration foreshadows the light of the resurrection, the light at the end of Lent's reflective and reparative tunnel.

It gives us just enough hope to love the Lenten journey, and love the journey, we must. The climb to the top of the mountain isn't something to get through, something to conquer, it's something to embrace in all of its harsh, grinding beauty.

Outdoor enthusiast extraordinaire Ed Abbey implored us to "climb the mountains, bag the peaks, run the rivers, breathe deep of that yet sweet and lucid air, sit quietly for a while and contemplate the precious stillness, the lovely, mysterious, and awesome space.

Enjoy yourselves, says Abbey, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to the body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much; I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those desk-bound men and women with their hearts in a safe deposit box, and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators.

I promise you this; You will outlive them.

Well, if you know the actual quote, "them" is not exactly what he said, but it will suffice for church today.

You will outlive them.

You will outlive them.

Jesus sure did.