

Transfiguration of Our Lord Yr C, 27/02/2022
Exod 34: 29-35; Lk 9:28-36
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“Mountains and valleys”

Mountains and valleys. All of us have been on mountain-tops and down in valleys. Some of you—maybe all of you—have been physically on top of a mountain, and physically down in a valley. Others of you may never have physically been on top of a mountain, although I’d hazard to guess that physically you have been down in a valley. However, there is another way of understanding mountains and valleys. Both our passage from Exodus and our gospel speak of this other way of understanding them. In both our Exodus passage and gospel, the mountain is a symbol for having some kind of holy experience, wherein one is more aware of God’s presence. Such holy, mountain-top encounters with God are different than so-called normal, everyday experiences.

There are similarities in Moses’s and Jesus’s mountain-top encounters with God. Both Moses and Jesus while on the mountain spoke with God. In the case of Jesus, Luke tells us that Jesus went up the mountain to pray, in other words, to speak with God. According to both passages, God also spoke on the mountain. In the case of Moses, God spoke directly to him, giving him the ten commandments. In the case of Jesus, God speaks from a cloud to Peter, James, and John, saying: “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” Those same words, you remember, were also spoken by God when Jesus was baptized.

The other similarity of these two holy encounters with God is the way the biblical writers describe the appearances of Moses and Jesus. Exodus 34:29 describes Moses like this: “Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.” Luke 9:29 describes Jesus’s appearance like this: “And while he (Jesus) was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.” In the Jewish faith, one understanding of the Hebrew word *Shekinah* is God’s holy, radiant light and presence. The appearance of both Moses’s and Jesus’s faces may have been God’s *Shekinah*, God’s holy, radiant light and presence shining on them. Notice that in both the Exodus passage, Aaron and the Israelites saw Moses’s shining face; and in the gospel Peter, James and John saw God’s glory shining on Jesus. In other words, there was something special and holy about the way Moses’s and Jesus’s faces were shining. So special that impulsive Peter wants to cherish and prolong this experience by building three dwellings or booths for Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

However, there is an interesting, most likely misinterpretation of the Hebrew word translated as “shone” in verse 29 of our Exodus passage. The Latin translation, the Vulgate, rendered

the word as “horn” instead of “shone.” Michelangelo likely had been inspired by this Latin Vulgate translation when he created his famous statue of Moses with horns on his head. Indeed, other artists also depicted Moses with horns. For example, when Pastor Julianna and I were in Germany, inside one church we visited, there was a picture of Moses with horns on his head.

Coming back to both of our passages now, notice that both Moses and Jesus did not remain on top of the mountain, both of them came down. Moses would face many challenges from the Israelites. He would have his share of disappointments, frustrations and sufferings. When Jesus came down from the mountain, he too faced many challenges, disappointments and sufferings. Yet, it was because of their mountain-top encounters with God that both Moses and Jesus were given the necessary love, encouragement and resources from the LORD God to be able to accomplish God’s greater purposes by loving and serving others. Moses served his people by giving them God’s law and leading them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Jesus as soon as he comes down from the mountain heals a boy suffering from an unclean spirit, and eventually his public ministry leads him to suffer and die on the cross to atone for the sins of humankind.

So too it is with each one of us. We too have our mountains and valleys, which reminds me of the following story.

Bob was 18 when he was asked to be a counselor at a church camp for junior highs, and it was a tough week. He wasn’t used to the woods, and the night sounds of mice and owls startled him and kept him awake. Like most teens, he liked to sleep late and getting up early (especially with his sleep interrupted!) wasn’t easy, either. The camp director and other counselors made fun of his morning crabbiness, forcing him to hide his feelings behind pleasantness. And, the boys in his cabin were busy testing his limits each day.

Yet, each day he loved it more and more. The hardships were overshadowed by the sheer joy of finding himself atop a bluff, reading aloud from the Psalms, “I will lift my eyes unto the hills...” and the eager report of a camper that 15 minutes stretched out on the grass taught him that “ants build highways, and isn’t it neat that God made them so small and so smart?”

By the end of the week, he had come to really love the kids and was thrilled to see several campers give their lives to God around the campfire. He returned home radiant, eager to tell family and church friends about this experience.

But family and friends weren’t all that interested. Some even made fun of him, and welcomed him “back to the real world.” “It’s so hard to communicate the beauty of what happened out there,” he complained to his pastor. “And it’s true, I wish I could feel that way all the time! How do you cope, coming home from such a great experience?” With his pastor’s help, Bob did manage to translate that mountain-top experience into daily prayer, Bible

reading and meditation. He did learn how to keep in contact with God. And eventually, he learned how to communicate that experience to others—in fact, he became a parish pastor, teaching and guiding people every day into a vital relationship with God.¹

Like Bob in this story; like Moses and Jesus; God gives us mountain-top experiences, holy encounters that help, prepare, and inspire us to love and serve others, and live our lives in the valleys. For some of you, it might be right here in church during worship, hearing the word and partaking of the Lord's Supper, praying and singing. For others of you, it might be a quiet time alone in the morning or evening to read your Bible, a devotion, and pray. For yet others of you, it might be going to some special place for a retreat or a holiday, not necessarily a mountain, although it could be. For yet others of you, it could be something else. Whatever your holy experience is, thank God for it!

¹ *Emphasis: A Preaching Journal for the Parish Pastor* Vol. 24, No. 5, January-February 1995, (Lima, OH: CSS Publishing Co., Inc.), p. 56.