

Sermon
Sunday, February 19th, 2023
The Last Sunday after the Epiphany: Transfiguration Sunday
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
Readings: [Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9](#)

*“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead.
But it doesn’t matter with me now
because I’ve been to the mountaintop.”*

These are Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, in the last speech he gave, the day before he was assassinated.

This morning we heard about Moses’s mountaintop experience, and then of the mountaintop experience that Jesus and Peter and James and John shared.

I had a conversation this week that reminded me of the mountaintop experience I had at my ordination to the priesthood. At an ordination to the priesthood, the ordinand kneels facing the Bishop. All the priests in the Diocese gather around the Bishop, placing a hand or hands on the shoulder of another so that everyone is connected. Heads are bowed. I remember this making a “swoosh”, and a hush descended. The Bishop placed his hands on my head, and offered the Prayer of Consecration, which includes these words:

Send down your Holy Spirit upon your servant Victoria, whom we consecrate in your name to the office and work of a priest in the Church...

At that moment, I felt something I’d never felt before. It was a moment that I can only describe as a coming into alignment, and I actually heard and felt a “click-click-click” and after that clicking, I had a body – mind – spirit moment of *rightness*. Everything felt *right* and with that rightness was hope, and peace, and profound joy.

Celtic spirituality talks about “thin places”: places where our finite and material world, and God’s eternal and spiritual reality collapses and becomes thin. Often, you’ll hear people talk about beautiful natural settings that are thin places...but thin places can be anywhere.

The “Holy Spirit moments” that made me take the first step in discerning this call to the priesthood, those were blessed moments, those were moments that made me feel like I was in a “thin place”, but I wouldn’t describe it as “mountaintop”. In the years since my ordination to the priesthood I’ve felt whispers of that feeling, of that rightness – particularly when I’m celebrating the Eucharist, when we’re in community, here – but I’ve not felt that overwhelming “mountaintop” feeling that I experienced that evening. Last Thursday evening, as we celebrated new ministry and my induction, this was a thin place, and I’m grateful for that!

Yet Martin Luther King’s words resonate:

“Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now because I’ve been to the mountaintop.

There are many difficult days. There are days when “I don’t know what will happen now” puts me in a valley so deep and dark that the mountaintop seems impossibly far away...

The difficult days do matter. The difficult days are hard, and it is hard to keep going alone on those difficult days. Remembering mountaintop experiences does help, but we need *each other* on those days. While that mountaintop experience at my ordination was deeply personal, I was not alone. Those gathered that evening were part of it, and it was with another person, in conversation – with presence, and with words shared – that I was reminded of that experience. We are not alone, and God wants us to remember this, and to remind each other of this.

Today is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, the last Sunday before Lent. We’ve climbed up the mountain through Jesus’s teaching and healing stories, through stories of God revealed in the season of Epiphany. We know that what comes next is Jesus’s descent down the mountain into Jerusalem. We have an opportunity today, to survey from the mountaintop. We are on this side of the Resurrection, we know that death is not the end. Yet, we know that there are difficult days ahead.

It was highlighted for me this week that Lent is framed by two stories: one on a mountaintop, which we heard today, and one in a garden: Gethsemane. One is a story of glory, and the other is a story of suffering. In both stories, Jesus goes

off with Peter, James and John. In today's story, they go up a mountain and Peter, James and John get a glimpse of Jesus's glory. There is a voice from heaven – God speaks the same loving words that we heard at Jesus' baptism – 'this is my beloved'. The disciples are afraid and fall to the ground. In the second story, Jesus takes the same three disciples away, to Gethsemane, but in this story, there is no comforting voice from heaven, and it is Jesus who throws himself onto the ground, and Peter, James and John just sleep through it all and he is alone. Up a mountain and in a garden. Glory and suffering. One story where Jesus tells them not to be afraid, and one where he is afraid himself.

This is life, isn't it? Up a mountain – moments of profound joy – *and* in a garden – times of deep grief, and struggle. Life is both glory and suffering. It's not either/or. Life isn't about reaching the mountaintop and staying there. It's about learning to hold both the glory and the suffering. It's about being with each other on the mountain and in the valleys. On the mountaintop, and in the garden.

Sam Wells talks about three kinds of prayer. The first is "Resurrection prayer" which expresses our need for God's miraculous power. The second is "Incarnational prayer" where we long and pray for God's presence with us, with others. The third is "Transfiguration prayer". Once, on BBC Radio 4, in a "Thought for the Day", Sam Wells talked about the time when a friend of his had learned that his cancer had returned. As he thought about what to pray for his friend, he knew that "Resurrection prayer" – a prayer for a miracle, for a cure, for a happy ending – wasn't realistic or even fair. He knew that "Incarnational prayer" – a prayer for acceptance, for a 'coming to terms with it' wasn't quite good enough either. He knew that 'coming to terms with it' wasn't honouring the love he had for his friend. So he prayed a "Transfiguration prayer". He prayed that if the time ahead couldn't be happy, that it would be beautiful. He prayed that his friend would find a depth of love that he'd never known before. And he prayed that over those days and weeks, that his friend would discover what his real nature and destiny were, so that when his last day came, those gathered around him would say 'That was tragedy', but also, 'that was glory'.

Life is both tragedy and glory. It is both mountaintop and valley. Our faith is not a way of escaping the mess and struggle and pain of human life. But neither is it simply a way of accepting it or putting up with it. Faith is way of transforming – transfiguring – our lives. It is a way of making beautiful whatever comes to us.

May we all have a transfiguring, transforming Lenten season. May it be a time when we open our eyes and hearts and minds to see that if life can't always be happy, that it can be beautiful. May we know that if we can't always be on the mountaintop, God is with us, and we are with each other in the low places.

I pray that Ascension will be a place that opens hearts and minds to mountaintop experiences, and that each of you will have those experiences. I pray that you will have someone beside you in the garden moments – and I will be with you if you will have me. I pray that if there is tragedy there will be glory, too. And I pray that God will transfigure and transform all our lives with love. In Jesus name. Amen.