

Climbing the Mountain
Mark 9:2-9
Saint Mark PC

This past Sunday's Super Bowl was not a very close game, (although since we lived in the Tampa Bay area for 15 years, we were happy for our former friends and neighbors there at the outcome.

So a lot of attention was given as always to the commercials in the game. They seemed to be even more obscure and cryptic this year than ever before.

One series of commercials really caught my interest, as we see a group of actors, athletes and even cartoon characters struggling to climb up a snow-covered mountain. Maybe you have seen this one. It is initially unclear what they are doing. Finally, they reach the pinnacle, and there is Patrick Stewart, in a handsome tuxedo, welcoming them.

"What are we doing up here?" one asks. "It's a metaphor" says another.

"I am outta here" says yet another.

"Oh no", says Patrick "this is where you live now."

"What are we supposed to do up here?"

Patrick Stewart says just two words - WE DANCE

For us,
today we mark this singular spiritual moment we call transfiguration as an amazing mountain top experience. The disciples, Peter and James and John all are invited to climb this mountain with Jesus, and they do. When they reach the pinnacle they are astounded at what they see. Jesus is in dazzling white, and somehow next to

him they see Moses and Elijah. They hear a voice from heaven saying this is my beloved son.

It's no wonder that Peter comes up with the idea that now this is where they will live - build three booths and we will stay up here forever.

I want us to look deeply into this scripture for just a moment, and consider the rich symbolism of this experience, described here and also in Matthew and Luke's gospels.

Mark is describing a transcendent experience. The high mountain always symbolized the place nearest heaven - in Biblical terms it is also the place of revelation. The cloud symbolized the divine presence, as in Exodus and Numbers. The voice from the cloud is the voice of God in Exodus. The brightness of Jesus' garments evokes the light of the divine presence rooted in the pillar of fire, and in other apocalyptic visions. Being between Moses and Elijah means standing between and with the Law and the Prophets.

The disciples are in obvious awe of this. Also interesting in this entire passage Jesus says nothing, until he orders them to remain silent about it, but the presence of the divine overwhelms them.

Events like the transfiguration are described by some writers as numinous or deeply spiritual experiences. Others use the word theophany, a visible manifestation to humanity of God.

Often I will look at a passage and say "what does this passage ask us to believe, and what does this passage ask us to do?"

In this one it clearly asks us to believe that Jesus is the son of God. You can't miss that. To do? It asks us to do nothing for a moment and bask in the blinding

light of that revelation. To shine. That incredible discovery that the three disciples are in awe to be witnessing. It asks us for just a moment, not to do but to be.

This, I think, is the answer to this mysterious passage.

We Dance.

Why? As our Office of Theology in the PC(USA) writes: Transfiguration Sunday celebrates the glorious revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Christ's manifestation as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Jesus' radiant appearance on the mountaintop evokes the devouring fire of the glory of the LORD at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24.17). Here, as at Jesus' baptism, God claims him as a beloved child, in whom God is well pleased.

And so we dance.

The Sunday immediately prior to Ash Wednesday is an appropriate time to celebrate the Transfiguration of the Lord.

We celebrate this fascinating story each year on the Sunday prior to embarking on a dark journey through the 40 days of lent. I believe that is because this is a pause on a journey of transition. Jesus comes down from the mountain, and in Matthew and Luke's version, he "sets his face to Jerusalem." He is about to transition into a dark and difficult time for himself and all of the disciples, leading to the hill at Calvary.

But first is the mountaintop experience. First, we dance.

Sometimes you get a glimpse of the eternal, just a glimpse of the holy. Have you ever had that experience? Perhaps even a numinous experience?

At least when it comes to mountains, I had a chance a few years ago to get to the top of Whiteface Mountain in NY state, elevation 4800 ft. It sounds very rugged, but at Whiteface, you can drive your car almost all the way up, walk another 100 yards and boom, you are at the summit! There is even a Café there.

The vista is stunning, and we discovered if you look due north, you see something small but sparkling, glimmering in the sunshine in the distance. We found out that what we were seeing from the high peaks in New York was the city of Montreal, Canada.

Sometime those peak experiences allow you to see unexpected things. Something that shines. A distant country if you will.

A glimpse of the holy. Have you ever had a glimpse of the holy?

It is there for you if you look.

Bill Moyers interviewed a writer named Joseph Campbell some years ago for a PBS series. I always remember a question that Moyers put to this professor of religion. He asked, "DO you ever have sympathy for the man with no INvisible means of support?"

Campbell laughed and said, No IN visible means, oh yes, to see him stumbling around when the waters of life are right there really evokes one's pity.

Bill Moyers perked up and said "the waters of life are right there? Where?"

Campbell said. "Wherever you are."

The waters of life are right there, if you can recognize them, glimpse them for even a moment.

You know as Peter found out, along with James and John, As enticing as it must be, Jesus never leaves us at the summit. It is that unique mystery of God in Christ in which Jesus manifests both the splendor and the lowliness of God, looking ahead to the crucifixion and resurrection narrative. He always brings us back down to the valley.

In my younger days, not that long ago, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit Scotland, and we decided to hike up the highest peak in the UK, a mountain called Ben Nevis. We did not drive that time, because you can't. Fortunately, it was June, so there was only snow on the very top peak.

It didn't take long before we looked like the group on that commercial struggling to take another step. It was rocky. Our legs were getting sore. After about three hours, we reached the snow line and decided that was good enough. There was no Starbucks.

We were very pleased with ourselves and thought our journey was done. However, I wasn't expecting that going back down the mountain was going to be more painful and difficult than going up. Apparently, a rocky descent uses joints and muscles that are not frequently exercised.

But even that pain and stiffness could not remove the glow of that experience. The vistas, the feeling of the immense creation of God.

I think Christ provides these mountain top experiences to give us new life as we go back into the valley, where we must return.

Stanley Ott puts it another way, when he says "Be the People of God, before you do the work of God"

DO you agree that faith is simply a matter of being in God's presence? More being than doing? It is not about trying to figure out the mystery of how this all happens. As in Exodus, Moses had such a mountain top experience that when he came down his face shone. He didn't even realize it -it was when he saw that others were afraid to go near him. Mountain top experiences.

Peter James and John. You and me. When we truly feel God's presence we shine.

We dance.

On Ash Wednesday, we begin that journey where we come down from the mountain and go through the valley of Lent. A time of spiritual inventory - opening ourselves to God's presence in that way. Even as we go through this, even if it is a little painful, may we shine, may we dance.

Not because of our own skill or creativity. Because of the majesty and power of God. We shine because all things are possible to this who believe.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.