

"Transfigured, Transfixed, Transformed"

Mark 9:2-9

Transfiguration Sunday

February 14, 2021

North UMC

There is something special about mountains. Folks throughout the ages have always sought God on top of mountains. Throughout Mark, Jesus goes to the mountains to pray. Moses went up Mount Sinai for the Commandments. Elijah encountered God's silent presence on the mountain. And Mel Brooks received the fifteen commandments (oops, ten!) on the mountain top.

About three mornings a week, I too went looking for God on a mountain top when I lived on the eastside of Atlanta. We were close to Stone Mountain and for my morning exercise and meditations I would hike up the side at 5:30 as the sun was rising. It was three miles up, a nice strenuous exercise, and the last 300 feet were nothing but boulders creating a moon-like atmosphere when the fog was settling. When I got to the top I would sit for a bit and read my pocket New Testament as I listened for God. Regardless of whether I had an epiphany on any given morning, there was one thing always present on the top of Stone Mountain: a gift shop. I may not have seen God but I knew I was at the top when I saw the beach towel of Robert E. Lee and Elvis hanging in the gift shop window.

Those three disciples were surprised by who they saw when they got to the top of the mountain with Jesus. There stood Moses and Elijah.

When you enter into those moments looking for a spiritual encounter who do you expect to find? Those moments may be times of quiet personal prayer; they may be opportunities for communal worship. When you go to the mountain what kind of faith encounter are you expecting?

Moses represented the law. In the story, he symbolized the tradition of the Commandments and the entire law code given to the people of Sinai that formed their covenant with God. The law was good. It was God's gift to the people to guide them in living into their covenant. But that day on the mountain, they did not encounter only Moses. Rather, it was Moses with Jesus whose appearance was illuminated and Moses was talking with Jesus. Their faith encounter was not just with Moses but Moses illuminated by the presence of Jesus.

Remember, the law is good. Moses and all he represents is an essential part of our Christian faith. However, they did not encounter Moses alone. Rather, he was conversing and standing in the light of the transfigured Christ. So, for our faith there is a place for the law and obedience to the commandments is an essential part of our faith expression. However, it is not the center of our faith. It is not what we should be fixated on.

Unwittingly, Christians have been fixated on regulations rather than the relationship with Jesus. Ironically, in the name of Jesus, believers have erected elaborate legalistic systems to help them sustain their faith in Christ. Ironically, it backfires because the focus shifts from the relationship to the rules. The moral practices which were meant to be a means for staying on focus on Jesus become the focus themselves.

Our Methodist forbearers were very susceptible to this temptation. The Methodist way to cultivate a deeper faith in Christ was to renounce the practices of the world and thus spend more time and energy

on their faith practices. This led to petty legalism around the Sabbath. For example, in the first part of the 20th century, the Indiana Annual Conference had a committee called Sabbath and Amusements committee. In their report to the 1917 annual conference they wrote: "the desecration of the Sabbath is one of the prominent sins of the day and threatens destruction to this divine institution and the prosperity of the church. Baseball, theaters and automobile joy-riding are some of the forms of desecration." Further, in their 1927 report they said: "[We] stand unalterably opposed to all those things which tend toward the breakdown of the Sabbath, such as commercialized Sunday baseball, Sunday theaters, and Sunday motion picture shows" and lobbied the officials of the Indiana State Fair to stop operating the fair on Sunday with admission charges.

Baseball? Baseball! What is God's name was their problem? They were looking for Moses not Jesus on the Sabbath.

When rules are the center of our faith, our faith is limited by never-ending guilt and shame. When it is all about keeping the rules, there will always be a rule that you break and regulation you fail to keep. This generates a torrent of guilt, a sense that we never measure up, a feeling that we are always having to reach up to get God's attention and approval.

When you go to your mountaintop is your faith clouded by the exhausting guilt of legalism?

They also saw Elijah up there talking with Jesus. Elijah symbolized the tradition of prophecy. The prophets were God's messengers who reminded and chided the people to renew their obedience to the covenant law. They carried the vision of how God's standard of justice and call to fidelity would reform the nation. They were casting God's vision of truth and hope for society.

Like Moses, Elijah was talking with Jesus and was illuminated by the transfigured Christ. Like the law, the prophets' messages were God's good gifts to the people. God still speaks truth and hope to our society. God calls us to renew our faith through the works of mercy, justice, and peace.

But sometimes our faith is fixated on politics rather than centered in Christ. It is a faith encounter with God devoid of personal edification and transformation. It speaks to contemporary issues but never addresses intimate problems of our souls. It is a faith controlled by political ideology. Faith is used to justify a political goal but disregards the means for achieving that goal. The core virtues of the Christian faith are ignored as long as one can check off all the correct boxes.

Ironically, in the name of Jesus, believers trying to be faithful to Christ in the present hour have reduced the faith to a litmus test that discredits Christianity in society. Over the past 40 years we have seen this on the political right and the political left. The issue of gay marriage and abortion have been used by conservative evangelicals as a litmus test for politicians to determine whether they will defend America as a so-called Christian nation. They have been so successful in branding our religion that according to Barna Research 91 percent of young non-Christians say the phrase "anti-homosexual" describes Christianity. In reaction, Christians of a liberal political persuasion play their own games of labeling and testing.

The result is self-righteousness and judging others with whom we disagree. We are evaluated positively or negatively by a yard sign and a bumper sticker, a tweet and a post. Instead of engaging in the hard work of speaking the truth with love, we opt for slogans. Instead of engaging in self-examination and receiving the opinions of others that might make us change or nuance our political

commitment, we become defensive and point the finger at others. Faith is reduced to a series of shallow affirmations, a list of check boxes on the right stance on political issues. In this attempt to make faith "relevant" to society it evades the ability to be intimate. Such faith never gets into your heart to challenge and transform us.

When you go to your mountaintop of prayer and worship, is it clouded by self-righteous defense?

When the three disciples got to the top, they saw Moses and Elijah speaking to the transfigured Christ. They see the relationship. The law of Moses and the prophets of Elijah are present and affirmed in the light of Christ. The role of the law is understood in the light of the transfiguration. Our obedience to the law is part of our faith encounter with Christ. The role of prophesy is understood in the light of the transfiguration. Our fidelity to the vision of truth and hope for society is part of our faith encounter with Christ. Christ fulfills the law and the prophets.

The fog on the mountain top engulfed Peter, James, and John. They could not see them anymore. It was God's way of humbling them to focus on Jesus. A voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the beloved, listen to him!" Then, the fog lifted and all they could see was Jesus. The end result of this mountaintop epiphany was to focus their gaze on Christ.

We can only fulfill the requirements of the law and the vision of the prophets when the light of Christ transforms us. What the disciples saw was a preview of the risen Christ. In the power of his resurrection our faith is completed so that we can live out the law and the prophets. It takes spiritual stamina to follow the commandments, and the Spirit of the risen Christ gives us that strength. The love of the risen Christ breaks the chains of guilt and shame that prevent us from fully living into His way.

In the same way, the Spirit of the risen Christ (that is, the Holy Spirit) gives us the wisdom to live into the way of the prophets. It takes spiritual discernment to enact the truth and hope of the prophets today. It takes courage to follow the principles of Jesus when it is not popular or produce results. We need the presence of the transfigured Christ to illuminate our hearts so that we will know how to speak the truth in love. We need to be focused on Christ to stay true to the prophets' vision of hope, and we need to listen to Christ to keep us steady in the work of justice and capable of walking the fine line of mercy and justice, of justice with humility.

We need the illumination of Christ to transform us. Lately, we have had many overcast days, typical for winter weather that we are deprived of the sun. Perhaps you are like many in my family and the lack of sunlight affects your mood. In our house, we have a light therapy lamp that we use periodically to fulfill the need for sunlight. Just as our bodies need light to give us energy and change our mood, the light of the transfigured Christ was given to the disciples to give them the strength and wisdom to keep on following him to Calvary. In the same way, we need the daily encounter with the risen and illuminated Christ to give us strength and wisdom to obey the commands and live into the hope of God.

Let us focus on Christ. Let us listen to Christ. Let us seek his presence when we go to the mountain of prayer.