

Rio Rancho Presbyterian Church

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MOUNTAIN TOP EXPERIENCES

Luke 9: 28-36

We are not sure where it happened. Perhaps atop Mount Hermon or Mount Tabor-two peaks in northern Israel. Now the Franciscans chose to build their Church of the Transfiguration atop Mount Tabor in 1924. The writer of II Peter 1:15 calls it “the holy mountain.” It was a secluded place, a place for prayer. It became a place for revelation, where God pulled back the curtain and allowed mere mortals to see something of the divine. Here three disciples-Peter, James, and John-saw awesome sights and heard astonishing words. It was indeed a holy mountain.

We know it followed climatic events around Caesarea Phillip. There Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Christ, even if he could not bear a suffering Christ. Soon thereafter, Luke says eight days, Jesus took his inner circle with him atop the mountain. So why just three? Why not all twelve? Perhaps the best we can say is that in Israel not all were allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, but only one high priest per year. Here only three enter the Holy of Holies on the holy mountain.

Luke tells us Jesus' three friends arrived at the top of the mountain and promptly fell asleep. No doubt it was a steep climb. Anybody would be tired after such a hike. On top of that it was probably getting dark. Jesus wanted his closest friends with him on the mountain top to join him in prayer. As they would at Gethsemane, his would-be prayer partners fall asleep. While they slept, Jesus prayed.

And then it happened, as mysterious an event as any in the amazing life of Jesus. Jesus' face began to shine. Then his clothes became dazzling white. Here we need inspired imagination-lighting and eerie music to underscore the presence of the divine. In a place of serene silence, the awesome mystery of God descends upon Jesus and transfigures him.

And that is not all. Standing with Jesus now are two ancient heroes of the faith-Moses and Elijah. This is a scene combining the best from the Twilight Zone and Close Encounters of the Third Kind. In this splendid moment, the three visit about Jesus' upcoming exodus, his departure in Jerusalem. Within the glory from above, they talk of the shame ahead.

Perhaps Moses and Elijah seek to console him, they who knew deep suffering in their own lives. They console him as will angels in

the Garden of Gethsemane. They comfort the transfigured Son of God.

Then the three show themselves to be, yet again, disciples without a clue. They stumble all over themselves as they wipe the sleep from their eyes. Peter imagines they could build three shrines so as to prolong the moment. Luke notes that Peter said this without realizing what he was saying. In the presence of the holy the best advice is simply this: “Let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Then God himself provides a dwelling place for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. A cloud, a thick cloud overshadows them and conceals them. From the cloud a mighty voice proclaims: “This is my Son, my Chosen One. Listen to him.” Then in a twinkling of the eye, the cloud disappears whisking Moses and Elijah away. Now Luke tells us the three disciples “kept silence.” Did the disciples bow in silent adoration? They should have.

And so should we whenever we have a mountain top experience. Have you ever shuddered in silence before the holy mystery of life? Did you want to kneel in silent adoration?

That is what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called a “peak experience.” In his classic text **Religion, Values and Peak**

Experiences Maslow described those profound moments that leave an indelible mark upon our souls. Maslow interviewed hundreds of people and asked them a simple question: “What has been the most ecstatic moment in your life?” Most people were quite embarrassed to answer. Scientifically trained people were especially shy about their peak experiences.

But Maslow did hear from many people about their ecstatic experiences. Would it surprise you that two things rose to the top: music and sex. Maslow himself said that his peak experiences involved getting married, having their first child, and undergoing psychoanalysis. For Maslow, there are so many ways up the mountain, but the view from the top is the same.

How did people feel about these peak experiences? First, they felt fortunate, graced. A common phrase used was: “I don’t deserve this.” So they felt immense gratitude, like they had encountered a gift from above. Surely the three disciples felt that same gratitude.

Second, in peak experiences people report feelings of wonder, awe, reverence, surrender, and even worship before the beauty of that moment. Some felt transported into heaven or being granted a vision of heavenly things. Surely Peter, James and John felt utter reverence before the glorified Son of God.

Third, peak experiences produce profound aftereffects, even radical change. In this transcendent moment one's whole life may be transformed. People began to care more deeply than they ever have before. That does not mean a person becomes morally or spiritually perfected. But the person is marked forever by this moment, like the three disciples must have been.

Finally, peak experiences create humility within a person, one with greater receptivity, a greater readiness to listen and hear. Those who have never smelled the roses or heard the birds sing or seen the sun set suddenly become observant and appreciative. Surely the three became more receptive after seeing that vision and hearing that divine voice.

So a peak experience, according to Maslow, helps us become more grateful, more reverent, more caring, more humble. Indeed, our lives are transfigured in a profound way.

Sisters and brothers, in these difficult and turbulent times, maybe we all need a peak experience. In Exodus 24 God calls Moses and the leadership of Israel to the mountain top to eat and drink before the Lord. The text says they "beheld the Lord" no doubt in a very mysterious way. Not everyone is called to the mountain top to see the Lord, as did the leadership of Israel and Jesus' closest

disciples. Oh that we could all have such a peak experience! How transformative that would be, indeed!

But we can all “touch the hem of the garment” whenever we approach the Table of our Lord. As we share in the bread and the cup, we are invited to hear the divine voice speak to us again, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.” And what Christ would say to you at this table? “You are my dear child. I have given my life for you. I ask only that you receive this bread and cup and share in my life. Become my disciple yet again. Bow before me in silence and awe. And give me your heart.”

If you hear that voice, surely this will be a peak moment for you. Your mountain top experience in the presence of Christ who loved you and gave himself for you, that you may give yourself to him. Thanks be to God. Amen.