

Luke 9/28ff Last Epiphany, Year C
7 February 2016 St. Michael's, Auburn

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP BACK INTO THE HURTING WORLD

True confession time! I need to come clean with you and admit that today's sermon could have been about 30% shorter. The Gospel reading we've just heard contains two sections, one about Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop and the other about the healing of an epileptic boy. We are allowed to omit the second section, but I'm opting to include it because the main point I want to make is this: *Our spiritual experiences accomplish very little unless they empower us to bring healing to a hurting world.*

As we begin today's story, some important things have been happening in Luke's Gospel. Peter has declared his belief that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus has declared that he must go to Jerusalem to endure suffering, to be rejected by the religious leaders, to be killed, and then to be raised from the dead.

This is where we enter the story. ***Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.*** The traditional location is Mount Tabor in Galilee, which is roughly the same height as Streaked Mountain near Buckfield, about 20 miles northwest of here. A nice afternoon hike, and it provides the same sort of beautiful view for miles around.

Something remarkable happened while they were on the mountaintop. ***And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.***

Jesus became radiant with glory, but I don't think it was Jesus himself who changed. What changed was the ability of the disciples to see. They were now able to see him as he had always been and always would be: the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God.

There was more. ***Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his***

departure [i.e. his death], **which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**

Was it a dream? **Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake** [no, not a dream: this was really happening], **they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.**

It looked as though Moses and Elijah were getting ready to leave Jesus, and that the vision was coming to an end. **Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" – not knowing what he said.**

Quite naturally and understandably, Peter wanted to prolong and enshrine this wonderful moment. But something even more wonderful was in store: **While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.**

This was no ordinary fluffy-up-in-the-sky cloud; this was what Jewish tradition calls the *Shekinah* – God's reality and presence made visible in a shining cloud of fire and light. This cloud of glory gathered them in; Peter and John and James saw themselves transfigured. **Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.**

They kept silent; they told no one.

I have never experienced anything this marvelous, but there have been moments in my life, when I have been suddenly and deeply aware of the wonder and beauty of creation, when I have been filled with joy and a longing for I don't know what, when I have felt somehow touched by God. There are moments when God makes me gasp in delight. I'm very reluctant to talk about these experiences, not because I'm afraid that people will think I'm crazy, but because they are so difficult to express, so hard to articulate, so personal and somehow so ... private. Perhaps you have had similar experiences and are similarly reluctant to speak

about them. They usually don't last long, and soon we return to humdrum everyday life. But inwardly changed.

That's what happened to Peter and James and John. They came back from their mountaintop experience to the clamoring cries of humanity with a real thud. It seemed like there were always people who needed Jesus, people who begged for his help.

It must have been difficult not to feel overwhelmed. ***On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.*** So many people! So many problems!

The focus shifts to the plight of an individual in that crowd. From our modern scientific perspective, we might conclude that this man's son was afflicted with some sort of epileptic disorder. But in biblical times people would have seen his illness as the work of an evil spirit. ***Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not."***

In his response, Jesus seems surprisingly angry and harsh. Was he angry at the disciples who bungled the cure? Or is his anger directed against a whole world, ourselves included, who find it so easy to shrug our shoulders and turn our backs on the suffering that surrounds us? I don't know. ***Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?"*** In any case, he granted the father's request. ***"Bring your son here."***

There is one final reference to the urgency of the situation. ***While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.*** This display of compassionate power had a profound effect on everyone. ***And all were astounded at the greatness of God.***

This Gospel passage brings us face to face with two very different realities: the mystical experience of divine glory in the transfiguration

of Jesus versus the grim and pitiful anguish of suffering humanity. They are very different, but they are also profoundly connected, and it is for good reason that Luke places them right next to each other.

This brings us back to my main point: *Our spiritual experiences accomplish very little unless they empower us to bring healing to a hurting world.*

When Peter, James, and John saw Jesus radiant with divine light, they were themselves gathered into that cloud of glory; they were having a spiritual experience of the highest order, one which left them dumbfounded and speechless with awe. When they came down the mountain and were met by the man with the epileptic son, they knew the depth and pathos of human need and suffering. They saw the vision so that they might respond with compassion. There was a connection.

Our spiritual experiences are probably going to be more humble and homespun. We might get nudges from God, glimpses of heavenly beauty and goodness, whispers of divine wisdom and insight. Still, it's tempting to keep them for ourselves, to hoard them in selfish delight, to think that we must be special and deeply prayerful people to have earned such blessings. That attitude is not genuine spirituality; it's religious narcissism.

Our acts of ministry and service are probably going to be likewise humble and homespun. We might find ourselves being more patient with tiresome people and situations, or volunteering at the food bank, or giving to charity rather than spending in self-indulgence. If we try to serve others without God's help, we will probably burn out pretty quickly.

Spiritual experience and active service are connected. Each is validated by the other. *All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. ... By God's mercy, we do not lose heart. [Second Corinthians 3: 18; 4:1]*

AMEN.