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## Mountain Top Experiences

Beginning at the age of 8 until I was 16 I spent 5 weeks every summer in the breathtaking mountains of North Carolina, at a camp called Greystone. For me camp was a significant part of my spiritual journey. It was where I learned what it meant to have a group of peers who walked with me on my spiritual journey, and in turn what it meant to have a personal relationship with God. In the mornings we listened to Bible stories while looking out over a beautiful mountain scape. On Sundays we sang hymns while crammed shoulder to shoulder next to our cabin mates. And at the beginning and the end we held candles while embracing hands and hearing prayers for our time on and off the mountain. All of these little moments made up for me what many call a mountain top experience, not to mention the fact that I, along with the 500 other campers, were quite literally up on a mountain. Which was not lost on us, the sacred beauty of our camp experience, mainly because we knew (or at least felt) that those moments and experiences were irreplaceable.

In our passage from Luke today, as we celebrate The Transfiguration, we hear our Gospel author's account of the most infamous mountain top experience. That of Peter, James and John's witness to Jesus' transformative encounters with not only God but Elija, and Moses as well. As Luke tells us that on the mountain top, "the appearance of [Jesus'] face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white." Understandably Peter immediately blurts out to Jesus, interrupting, I would imagine, his conversation with the centuries old Moses and Elija, to say, "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." And how could he, I mean he most likely doesn't even realize what he is witnessing much less what he is doing, or saying. But, that's the thing about mountain top experiences, they invoke in us feelings, emotions, responses we never knew were possible. They allow us to see how the transcendent Divine is not that separate from our earthly world. Which is, understandably, why Peter wants to preserve this incredible experience and transformative moment.

While being in the mountains certainly added (for me personally) to the spiritual transformation that I had at camp, I don't believe it was going up to the literal highest heights that allowed me to feel a spiritual connection to the Divine. I believe it was more so the fact that I had to go through the valley, and climb up that mountain to arrive there. As an only child, leaving the comfort and security of my parents and home behind was a difficult transition each summer, not to mention the adolescent angst of not knowing if my same friends would be in my cabin, or if my counselor would be as personable and compassionate as the years before? Those first few days at camp were never easy and always unnerving. But, they were necessary, the stripping away of familiarity, of comfort, of ease were necessary to experience transformation and more so connection to God, to my fellow campers, and to myself.

Our story of the Transfiguration is one found in each and every one of our Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And each one concludes the same, as Jesus and his disciples descend from the mountain they are greeted in the valley by the father of a demon possessed boy. As the Father pleads with Jesus, to "heal my son" after the attempts of the other disciples had fallen

short. Jesus replies, or rather rebukes them all, saying “You faithless and perverse generation.” And then going on, of course, to heal the boy. Reminding and assuring us, it is not only up on the mountain top that God’s transformative power is ready and available, it is not only within the beauty of a “sacred space” that lives are changed, it is everywhere in every moment that God’s redeeming, healing, and life changing power can be found. Now, I’ll be honest, finding the Divine within the mundane takes more work, but the payout, in my experience, is so much greater.

And, I would assume, The Franciscan priest and mystic, Richard Rohr, whom I often quote from this pulpit, would agree. As he speaks to the challenges that many of our “mountaintop” religious interactions and experiences create for our spiritual lives and journeys. Arguing that if we put too much into these experiences alone, we run the risk of creating “an artificial divide or dualism between the spiritual and the so-called non-spiritual.” Asserting that, “This dualism [the divide between the spiritual and non spiritual] is precisely what Jesus came to reveal as a lie. The Incarnation proclaims that matter and spirit have never been separate. Jesus came to tell us that these two seemingly different worlds are — and always have been — one.” Meaning our mountain top experiences, while significant, even transformative, are not the only places or times in which we are able to experience the sacred, awe evoking, beauty of the Divine. And, while I would certainly not discount those experiences, I would argue that we would be wise, or at least careful, not to allow our mountain top moments to overshadow the awesomeness of God’s movement, imbued in every part and at every point of creation.

I spent 8 Summers on that mountain experiencing the highest heights of my faith journey, only to come back down and enter the Fall feeling as though I had little to nothing to lean on as I sought to uphold those same moments and experiences back at home. And here is why I believe Jesus rebukes Peter when he blurts out that they should build three dwellings. They do not need the dwellings on the mountain to preserve the sacredness of that moment, it’s power has already done the work and planted the seed of God’s redeeming love within them. What they are called to do instead is exactly what we see as they go back into the valley, to take that moment and make it a movement, a living breathing transformative part of their lives. Finding, looking, expecting that same illuminating power not only on the top of that mountain but in every part, including the valleys, of this life and this world. They know it was possible there, now they must see how it can become a reality here. How will we work to take all those moments, the highest heights when we thought it couldn’t get much better, the transformative experiences when our lives were changed, the awe evoking occurrences when we knew the Divine was truly present and among us, and allow them to propel us forward into Holy movement? So that we can know and see and share that transformative power of God, that sacred power of the Holy which is all around us just waiting to be shared and grasped and experienced here and now, everywhere and always. Remembering that our God is not only on the mountain but also in the valley, present and waiting to be noticed, to be grasped, and to be shared no matter when or where we go.