

"Mountaintop Experiences"
Sermon for Transfiguration Sunday
Lectionary Year C
February 14, 2010

Texts: Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2
Dr. David T. Howeth

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? We refer to experiences in which we feel especially close to God by that designation. They are mountaintop experiences. The term "mountaintop" comes from the biblical accounts, like the transfiguration of Jesus and Moses' experience with God on Mount Sinai, in which those persons involved felt and displayed the results of an especially close communion with God. Our mountaintop experiences are those times in our lives when we have felt the presence of God in a unique way, and we come away from those encounters with God reflecting his glory in us in some visible and tangible way. There have been several such experiences in my life, and each one has provided a rich blessing for me.

Since today is Transfiguration Sunday, it is appropriate that we focus our attention on one of the mountaintop experiences recorded in scripture. More often than not we look at the transfiguration itself, when Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on the mountain to witness his close communion with God. This time around we are going to look at a similar experience that happened to Moses, as recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus and as commented on by Paul in the New Testament letter of 2 Corinthians.

These passages refer to the same incident, that being when Moses

came down from Mount Sinai after having close communion with God for a second time, bringing with him another set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments to replace the first set which he had broken after becoming angry with the people for worshiping the golden calf. These are rather difficult passages to understand, so I want to go through them slowly by suggesting that there are four ideas put forth in them concerning the close communion with God in our mountaintop experiences and its results in our lives.

First, close communion with God has a transforming effect on us that we may not recognize but that is apparent to others. As the passage from Exodus describes it, Moses came down from the mountain with a shining face. Apparently God gave him a facial up on the mountain.

Moses had that certain glow about him, and everyone noticed it right away. It was like he had been given a makeover; he was a new man.

A genuine encounter with God changes us. We are not the same if we really have met God and had close communion with him. We have a different perspective on life and a different approach to life. When we appropriate God's claim on our lives, we are transformed. That's what conversion is all about.

We may not even notice it, but others do. A true communion with God changes the way we behave to the point that people pick up on it. It is obvious. People say, "What has happened to you?" Think about your mountaintop experiences. If they were authentic encounters with God, than at least for a while, you acted in a different way and someone—your parents, your brother or sister, your friends, your spouse, your colleagues at work, your cat or dog—someone noticed the change in you.

Second, having suggested that close communion with God has a transforming effect on us that is apparent to others, we need also to say on the basis of the Exodus passages that **not everyone may respond positively toward the change God works in us as a result of our close communion with him.** We can see from the narrative that when Moses came down from the mountain the people ran and hid from him. They did not exactly like his new face. It frightened them. Moses had to call them out of hiding. They may have been scared by what they saw in him, the glory of God. Real godliness is quite scary, especially to us sinners. It makes us uncomfortable. Not only did Moses look scary, but when he finally got them to come close to him, he made them do something even more frightening than to look at him—Moses made them responsible for everything God had spoken to him on Mount Sinai. Taking responsibility is always threatening.

If you have had a real encounter with God, it may scare away some of your family members, friends, or colleagues. I met John Baldwin in the summer of 1986 when he and I were both counselors at a Conference Senior High Camp. At the time John sold cars at Eagle Hyundai in Dallas. The week after camp he went back to work at the car dealership, and the first thing his boss said to him was, "John, I want you to say the 'f' word three times, so that I will know you didn't get too much religion last week." John wouldn't do it. What's more, he quit his job a short time later and began looking for a position as a youth minister. He's been on staff at Custer Road UMC in Plano ever since. You see, John *had* a mountaintop experience at camp, it *had* changed him, and his manager couldn't handle it. The same thing may happen to you.

Not everyone may respond positively to the change that will come about in us from close communion with God.

Third, although we may need at times to veil the glory of God that shines through us after we have had close communion with him in order to accommodate our witness to others, nevertheless because of Christ and his Spirit, we may witness boldly and with liberty. Here is where the road gets rocky in these passages of scripture. Moses felt the need to put a veil over his face after he spoke to the people what God told him to say. Whenever Moses would be in the presence of God or speak to the people, he would take off the veil. In between times, he kept the veil on. Why? We don't know for sure.

One reason may have been to make the point that when Moses spoke for God, using God's words, he had God's authority, made apparent by the unveiled glory of God shining in his face. When he was not speaking to God or for God, he would wear the veil to cover his face. The veil may have been used to help the people differentiate between God's words and Moses' own words [Durham, *WBC*]. The veil was a symbol of authority. When it was off, it meant that God was speaking through Moses. When it was on, Moses himself was talking. Thus the veil helped the people to keep holy things holy. For this same reason, many ministers today, like myself, choose to wear robes and stoles in worship but not in other settings.

Moses may also have used the veil to make the point to the people that they, because of their sinfulness, could not gaze upon God's glory continually without interruption [Hughes, *NICNT*]. There was just so much glory that the unworthy people could take. The veil was to remind

them of their sin and make the point in a new way that the holy and the unholy don't mix all that well.

In the passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul argues that any need for a veil has been done away with in Christ and with the Holy Spirit. What does that mean for us? It means that in Christ, there is no need for the concealment of God's glory that Moses had to participate in. In Christ the holy and the unholy have come together. In Christ there is only openness and no hiddenness of God. Therefore we may witness to God's glory in our lives with boldness and liberty.

If we take both of these passages together, I think we can gain an insight into how to talk with others about our mountaintop experiences. From Moses we can learn that we may need to downplay to a certain extent what has happened to us in order not to beat people over the head with it. When a significant spiritual experience happens to us, it is usually so exciting that it is all we want to talk about. That's completely normal and absolutely to be expected.

However, we can wear out our welcome pretty quickly with people if we don't veil our experience somewhat. As we have said already, people are not always receptive to what has happened to us, and we need to resist the desire we might have to use our experience to insist that others have the same experience we have had. People don't usually respond very well to sentences that begin with phrases like "You ought to," or "You should," or "You need to." Insisting that everyone else around us have the same experience we have had may not be the best way to share our mountaintop experiences with them.

On the other hand, Paul's comments on the Moses story also show

us that because we have the Spirit of Christ with us, we don't have to keep our experiences a secret. As is often the case, we need to avoid both extremes—talking about our mountaintop experiences too much and talking about them too little. Spiritual experiences are to be shared under the guidance and with the sensitivity of the Spirit. We need to be bold and free enough to trust the work of the Spirit in other people's lives. The Spirit is working to lower the veil, so that the people around us *who most need to* will want to hear about what happened to us on the mountaintop. We can trust the Spirit to help us talk openly and appropriately about our experiences of close communion with God.

Finally, these passages make the point that **Christ has made close communion with God an enduring possibility for all of us**. Christ has made it possible for us to gaze at the glory of God without a veil, without interruption, through the life of the worshiping community and the body of Christ, the church. Also because of Christ's death for the sake of the church and the presence of the Spirit within the church, we are being transformed ourselves, in the same way Moses was, so that we continually reflect God's glory. The glory that shone in Moses' face faded when he was not in God's presence. That glory was renewed in him each time he would come again into the presence of God. The passage therefore helps us to understand that *the results of mountaintop experiences always fade over time*. Maybe this is why the worship, the study, the fellowship, and the missional outreach of the church need to be weekly activities for us. God wants to transform us permanently, not just temporarily, so that his glory may shine through us continually to the other people around us.

Close communion with God, the kind of communion we find in our mountaintop experiences, reveals God's glory to us. And these experiences, though unrepeatable, can stay with us if we renew ourselves continually in our walk in the Spirit following Christ through the life of the church. Whereas Moses was not permanently transformed, *we can be*. This is what sanctification means, being made gradually but continually into the likeness of Christ and reflecting his glory. Through the worship, the study, the fellowship, and the missional work of the church, we have the opportunity for ongoing close communion with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

I hope you already have had and will continue to have many mountaintop experiences, feeling firsthand a close communion with God. It is my prayer that these experiences may be truly transforming encounters with God that are obvious to those around you because of the Christlikeness that results in your life. I would wish that the transformation that takes place in you be received favorably by those around you. It is also my hope that the Holy Spirit guides you as you seek to find appropriate opportunities to share your experiences with others whom the Spirit is also guiding to be open to what you have to share. Most of all, it is my desire that our mountaintop experiences be sustained and made to endure through the witness and the work of the church so that close communion with God is a part of our lives not just every now and then, but week in and week out.