

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

February 26 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Exodus 34: 29:35

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 17: 1-8

Everyday Holiness

Mountains. They are impressive to look at and to climb. **[show – 3 pictures]** I have never climbed a mountain but I have a good friend who regularly climbs and pushes himself to tackle higher and higher mountains. And listening to his stories of spending - sometimes a week in freezing cold, hanging precariously off high cliffs just leaves me wondering why he takes such risks. What is the attraction?

Well, one day I asked him and I thought he would say something like, “I climb because it’s there” or “To get to the top” or some other cliché answer. But instead he simply said, “I climb to help me appreciate life because when I’m on the mountain hanging 500 feet in the air, I realize how small I am – how precious life really is.” And then he paused – and said “And you know the truth is you never come down a mountain the same person who went up it.”

This is what Peter, John, and James came to discover in our reading from today. The three of them were tagging along. I’m sure Jesus was a few steps ahead. After all, he was the only one who knew where they were going. It had been that way since the first day, when they got in step behind him hearing him teach, seeing him heal. And now he decided to climb up the mountain, first turning to the three to say, “Come, follow me.” **[Show Picture – Mount Tabor]**

But what was going through their heads? We don’t know say for sure. One thing’s for certain: They had no clue what was coming. Jesus was always a few steps ahead of them.

What did they see on that mountaintop? Matthew can’t quite say. The words aren’t adequate. The scripture states - “The appearance of his face changed. His clothes became dazzling white.” And they heard a voice proclaim, “This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to him”

The power of the transfiguration story is the mystery and awe it produces. We don’t have the words to make much sense of it and I think that is okay. After

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all the word, transfiguration, is not one we are used to hearing or using every day. But to be transfigured is to be transformed, to see things in a new way, in a new light. To be changed through a new perspective.

A woman is diagnosed with breast cancer. For many anxious months she goes through surgery and treatments until after a year, she is told that her life is no longer in danger. She thanks God and vows never to take life for granted again.

A young man is driving late at night when he suddenly sees something cross the road. He swerves the car off the road almost hitting a tree. He walks away from the accident with a few cuts and bruises but everything around him seems different somehow. As if the world is a new place.

A couple tries to have a child. After many years she gets pregnant and the house is readied. Finally, the day arrives, the baby is born and they take her home. As they enter the house with their child in their arms it no longer seems like the same place they had left only hours before. They know that their lives are completely different now.

There are moments in life when it seems like something falls away, and we see deeper, below the surface of everyday attention, and we get a glimpse, of a new world that has been in front of us the whole time, but we are seeing it as if for the first time.

In that moment on the mountain, Peter, James, and John stepped into a new world, a new way of seeing, a new way of hearing, and new way of being. For on that day Jesus did not suddenly light up and become something he was not. No, their eyes were opened so they could see Jesus as he had always been. The voice in the cloud was not new. Their ears were opened and they heard the voice that has never ceased speaking from the beginning.

For in this moment, they saw Jesus as he truly is - in his full glory as the savior bathed in the light of his power and presence that transcends and transforms all things. It was a pivotal experience where they went below the surface to catch a glimpse of what had been in front of them all along.

For you see, Jesus is beginning to prepare the disciples to carry on after he is gone. He knows that Jerusalem and the cross is before him. He knows that soon

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things will change radically. The disciples on the mountaintop were part of an experience that they would carry with them for the rest of their lives.

And so, we need to see what is front of us recognizing those ongoing holy moments that mark our souls and our lives - for it is those powerful moments that give us strength for the journey when we go through the lonely, bitter, hurtful times of life.

I was reading recently about the annual migration to Mount Fuji in Japan. **[Show Picture]** Pilgrims come by the thousands to take this deeply spiritual two day climb to the summit of the mountain taking with them a bamboo walking stick that is branded at each of the eight rest stations on the way to the top. The pilgrims time their ascent to be at the summit at sunrise because it is said that seeing the beauty and majesty of the sunrise from the top of Mount Fuji will mark a person's soul and change them forever. These pilgrims come to find out what my mountain climbing friend knows – you never come down a mountain the some person who went up because the journey up a mountain or through life always changes us. And so the brands on the walking stick don't just make it a nice souvenir; but a symbol of being marked by the holiness of this journey and encounter with the awesome display of God's creative and majestic power.

But we don't need to climb any mountain to have this experience – we don't need to travel far or climb high - for God is with us every step on our journey through life. Holy moments are all around us if we take time to see them. For God is still speaking, still loving, still forgiving, still calling. And so, the question really is - how are we branded and marked by our encounter with the divine on our journey through our life? A young woman, eight months pregnant with child. Flops onto the sofa. Kicks off her tennis shoes. And groans, "I don't think I can make it." Wise from the years, the young woman's mother picks up a photo album and sits down beside her daughter. As they flip through the pictures the mother sees yesterday, the daughter sees tomorrow. And for a moment the daughter is changed. The here and now becomes the there and then. Her child is born, she hears the first words. A transformation occurs. The pain in her back is now overshadowed by the joy approaching. For the first time that day she smiles.

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Or this situation. A snowstorm in Chicago strands a weary traveler. He sits on his briefcase, and drapes his overcoat over his lap. He is exhausted and worn out. A flight is announced, he checks his boarding pass. His flight has been delayed for two hours. As he sticks his boarding pass back into his coat, a leather calendar tumbles out. There, amidst taxi receipts and credit cards, is a laminated photo of a family – his family. For what seems like only a moment a transformation happens there in the airport, he is at home. The television is off. The kids are in bed. The fire is golden. His wife is sleeping on the couch. The world of airport, hotels, and deadlines are a world away. He is where it is all worthwhile. He is home. Someone taps him on the shoulder, and he hears a voice, “Is that your flight?” Hours had become minutes as he looks at the half-empty waiting area – and sees the line forming at the gate and smiles. “Yeah, it’s my flight home.”

Can time on a couch with a parent or waiting in an airport be a holy time? You bet, for the message this day is that the divine and holy light of Christ continues to shine down the corridors of time and space to illuminate and transform the secular into the sacred, the mundane into the momentous. And our challenge this day is see the luminous, the glorious, the holy and the sacred in the world around us, in the mess and routine of our lives.

The holiness of a sacred moment when: **[show pictures]**

A child crawls into your lap for a story? The hand of the homeless reaches out for a sandwich? The strains of the music that moves you floods your soul? You take time to pray? You open the pages of Scripture to read and study? You pray with someone in need? You awaken to a sunrise? And so on.

And so take just a moment and think about the holy times in your life. Those times when we have felt the presence of God in a new way – felt our faith come alive – found ourselves in a moment where what came after was completely different than what came before. A moment that may have been pivotal in shaping who you are.

For me, just some of these moments include my calling into ministry, my wedding, birth of my kids, Even the hard times of life – grieving a loss, struggling through an illness - God was there in those moments. And so, I have come to see that each one whether joyful or painful was in its own way a holy moment among

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thousands of holy moments. In each one God moved in my life. Each one took me below the surface to a deeper reality to catch a glimpse of love, a glimpse of hope, a glimpse of what was most important and precious and valuable in life that had been in front of me the whole time. Each one was a transfiguration moment, that is a source of strength in my life.

I don't know what holy moments you have experienced. All I know is that if we stop long enough, we will realize we have had them, and we all need to remember them and let them transform us. For we need to be taking the time to focus on God and get a mountain top view, a wider perspective on life through a regular prayer time, regular Bible study, looking for ways to serve others or just opening ourselves up to be in tune with God, because if we don't we will miss out on the larger meaning and purpose of our lives. For we are not meant to stay on the mountain, like Peter, who wanted to build tents and memorialize the moment staying stuck in the past, instead we are to move forward through the valleys of life.

We are meant to let the light of Christ transform and shine through each one of us as we moment by moment - daily love God, love our neighbor and serve our world. But will we make the choice to see it, feel it, and share it?

I want to end with this short story about two monks walking back through a mountain pass to their monastery in the freezing cold:

As they were coming down the mountain, two monks hear a man calling for help in the ravine below. They want to stop, but know they must reach the monastery before sunset or they will freeze to death.

The first monk chooses to risk the danger of the cold in order to help another to safety. He climbs down into the ravine and gathers the wounded man into his arms, and slowly makes his way back to the monastery.

The second monk has already gone on ahead, determined to get back safely before sunset. Night comes, and with it, the bitter cold.

As the first monk nears the monastery, he stumbles over something in the middle of the road. To his sorrow, it is the body of his brother who had gone on alone and had frozen to death. But the compassionate monk was kept warm by the heat exchanged from carrying the stranger in need.

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So, as we head into the valleys of our world - let us recognize the holy moments all around us – these moments that change our perspective – for the holiest moment is to simply hold another person – care for another person – listen to another person – forgive another person – love another person – whether you know them or agree with them. For when the light and love of Christ touches and warms our hearts and lives we realize that faith is not solely an inward-directed, contemplative activity. Faith is action. Faith must always be directed outwards toward the world or else it will become distorted and warped.

And so today we prepare to begin our descent from the mountaintop to walk with Christ and the disciples on the road to Jerusalem and beyond. As we go out today into the world around us. Let us go looking beneath the surface through our prayers, our service, our faith to see – the holy moments, the hope, the love, the beauty that has been there all along, right in front of us – in the ordinary and everyday. To see yesterday's joys, today's blessings, and tomorrow's dreams. As we go forward to proclaim and live out this light and love, hope and peace for all to see. Amen.