

Life in the Lowlands Interrupted

A sermon based on Mark 9:2-9

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Conventional wisdom would indicate that mountaintop experiences are rare for people from Saskatchewan. The only mountain we can claim was dredged together by huge earth-moving machines, and even that mound is but a silly blip on the endless prairie landscape. Used as a starter skiing hill, Mount Blackstrap has evoked lots of ridicule, but, to my knowledge, very few lofty visions. On the other hand, perhaps any change of elevation is enough to provoke visions in prairie people. And if, like me, you're afraid of heights, any change of elevation is more than enough to lay claim to the title of mountaintop experience.

I can recall two mountaintop experiences in Saskatchewan. One was looking into the valley of Lake Manitou, where I spent my teenage summers. The valley's steep sides afforded my friends and I more than enough opportunities to take spills on our bikes, from which I still have souvenir scars. Though the water of that lake is sheer brine, and the foliage on the hills less than lush, the sight of those green hills after a rain remains a sharp memory, sharp enough to evoke dreams of retiring there.

My other prairie mountaintop experience occurred in the Cypress Hills. If you scour the prairie landscape long enough, you will find a range of hills in the far southwestern corner of the province, and I recall sitting on a high point of the Cypress Hills with Dorothy and a friend, the vista before us glorious, and evoking in me an intense mélange of feelings and associations, loneliness and intimacy, all combined to form an unforgettable, if mournful moment.

Biblical Mountaintop Moments

Mountaintop experiences may be rare for prairie people, but they are not rare in the Scriptures. There are twenty-one narratively significant mountains mentioned in Scripture: Mount Sinai; Mount Tabor; Mount Horeb; Mount Hermon, and a host of others. Mountains in Scripture are the location for theophanies of various sorts—a location not just a little closer to heaven, but the junction point between heavenly and earthly events.

It was on mountaintops that most of God's great epiphanies to Moses took place. God called Moses up the mountain at Sinai (Exodus 19:3), saying to him, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." (19:5-6) Which Moses did, and to which the people responded well, and then begins the drama of God, under cover of a "dense cloud" (19:9 & 16), giving Israel the Law. Accompanied by thunder and lightning (19:16), not to mention a brass ensemble that played so loud it scared the people, the community took their place at the foot of the mountain, now "wrapped in smoke" (19:17-18). The "Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain" (19:20), and there gave Moses the Ten Commandments, as well as instructions for worship, sacrifice, and everyday life.

The impression of this mountaintop experience is one of the awesome presence of God. The cloud of God's presence lingered over Sinai for six days, calling to mind God's six days of activity in creation. The writer wants to convey to us that something of the same magnitude is happening here. Indeed, Moses' treks up Sinai and the time he chatted up with God there began to change his countenance! Once, after being with God for "forty days and forty nights," Moses came down from the mountain, and it is said that the "skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." (34:29) It was shining so brightly that Aaron and others were afraid to come near him." (34:30)

Moses, however, was not the only Old Testament character to have mountaintop experiences. Elijah, prominent in today's Old Testament lesson, was at a particularly low point in his life (1 Kings 19:3-4) when God told him, "Go out and stand on the mountain..., for (I am) about to pass by." (19:11) And then follows another dramatic mountaintop experience, with a "great wind" and much commotion, only this mountaintop experience has a twist to it, God appearing to Elijah, "not in the wind..., not in the earthquake..., not in...fire," but in a still small voice, shrouded in silence. (19:11-13)

Mountains were also the scene of significant events in the life of Jesus. It was on a mountain that Jesus called and named his twelve apostles (Mark 3:13); it is to a mountain that he withdrew to pray (Mark 6:46); it is from a mountain that Jesus, in that last climactic week, watched Jerusalem, and disclosed to his disciples their task following his death (Mark 13:3); and it is to the Mount of Olives that Jesus and his disciples withdrew after the Last Supper (Mark 14:26).

A Moment on the Mount of Transfiguration

A mountain also figures in today's Gospel reading. Mark tells us that "Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves." (Mark 9:2) And given what mountains signify in the Scriptures, it's not altogether surprising that once they got up the mountain Jesus "was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them." (9:2-3) This is a scene not unlike the one that affected Moses' countenance, and the fact that Mark mentions that this happened "six days later" is another parallel to Moses' experience. And if that isn't coincidence enough, Moses himself makes an appearance, along with Elijah! The disciples witness all three talking together—a coalescence of the Law, the Prophets, and the New Wine, if you will. It stunned the disciples. (9:6) "Then a cloud overshadowed them," we read—just like the cloud on Mount Sinai—"and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!'" (9:7)—a confirmation of Jesus very similar to the one experienced at his baptism. (Mark 1:11) Then, very suddenly, the moment was gone, and when the disciples looked around, they saw only Jesus, who cautioned them, in mysterious terms, to be very discreet about this mountaintop experience. (9:9) To the question of why Jesus "ordered" the disciples not to speak about this event, one commentator answered, "It's a literary device to prevent a sub-climactic moment from dominating the climactic moment, and behaving as an anticlimactic moment." (Michael Phillips) Certainly clears it up for me!

Magical Moments of Mystery and Glory

It's a strange story, but not unlike moments you and I have had—those moments when the veil of our incomprehension is lifted and we get a brief, unexpected, insightful glimpse into the meaning of things. Our moments may not be sufficiently powerful to

conjure up Moses and Elijah, but they are special, precious moments, nonetheless. It may be a moment at your graduation, perhaps at your baptism, perhaps your first kiss! Perhaps a moment at your wedding, or at the birth of a child. I remember leaning over the crib of one of my children—I won't say which one, lest I start a fracas—but I remember coming home exhausted after a late and tiring meeting and as I leaned over the crib and just looked at my sleeping baby, so much love welled up in my heart that I had enough to last me for several more marathon meetings.

It may a moment at church camp that moved you; it may be something of a smaller, quieter nature, like a very intimate conversation with your father, or your mother, or a friend. I remember the day I spent with my father after I took him to the hospital for surgery, and though he would live a few more months, and I would see him again, on that day there was still a twinkle in his eye, a teasing tone in his comments, tears in his eyes when he talked about my mother, and a wonderful tenderness in his demeanour. A very memorable moment.

There are moments in life, fleeting moments, when the curtain between present and future is drawn back and we glimpse, just for a moment, what tomorrow holds for us. It is one of those moments on which time turns. A teenage boy plays one-on-one basketball with his dad. His dad shoots and misses. The boy steps back, shoots. It's a perfect shot and for just a split second that seems eternal, father and son contemplate the reality that the son, who once was taught by the father, is now better than the father.

"You know, I think you made that shot better than I," says the father, with a smile. The son smiles too, but doesn't answer, because both of them, for one small moment, have been given a glimpse of the future, the boy's future one of ascendancy, the father's no longer one of mastery in the relationship. (William Willimon, "Glimpses of Eternity")

Some of our special moments may be more intense, more spiritual in nature. Frederick Buechner talks of moments when something is so touching, so incandescent, so alive that it literally transfigures the human face. (Listen to Your Life, page 203) Herbert O'Driscoll talks of an afternoon sun whose blazing light streaming into a room suddenly unlocked innumerable moments of afternoon sunlight, an awareness of a thousand afternoons, as if afternoon were a definable inner country in itself...." (And Every Wonder True, page 84)

Many such intense, mystical moments litter the literature of Christian history and spirituality. Madeleine L'Engle tells of a childhood experience when her parents took her out to look at the stars. The night sky, the constant rolling of breakers against the shore, the stupendous light of the stars, all made an indelible impression on her. She was intuitively aware not only of a beauty she had not seen before, it was also a very conscious moment of revelation for her. She writes, "I saw creation bursting the bounds of daily restriction, and stretching out from dimension to dimension, beyond any human comprehension." (Glimpses of Grace, page 2) It inspired in her a holy resistance to those who try to make God comprehensible, who try to domesticate God so that God is easy to believe in. A comprehensible God, she says, is no more than an idol!

Glimpses are just that—glimpses. Rarely does God bowl us over, write some slogan across the sky in flashing, neon letters. More often, God quietly courts us, teases us, pulling back the curtain between today and eternity for a brief peek, and when such a glimpse is afforded you, it is a gift, a fleeting gift, to be cherished—a fleeting, blessed gift

of revelation for which silence and discretion may be the most appropriate response, for how do you explain the inexplicable?

How to Spoil a Transfigured Moment

Unfortunately, though that fleeting moment on the Mount of Transfiguration was a moment of confirmation for Jesus and a brief glimpse of the transcendent for the disciples, it was almost spoiled by one blathering disciple named Peter! When Peter saw Jesus talking to Elijah and Moses, he was overcome by the moment, and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” (9:5) Essentially, Peter wanted to freeze this moment of mystery; he wanted to build three dwellings, three tents, shelters, booths, kiosks, memorials, if you will. Mark softens Peter’s blather by stating that Peter was terrified and didn’t know what to say (9:6), but the word Peter used for “dwellings” may also be an allusion to the temple, and implies an effort to institutionalize this moment, to capture it in some way! Peter misconstrued the situation, thinking perhaps that the moment could be sustained. He wanted to build some residences, settle down in this lofty place, and keep breathing in this rarefied air.

Here before them stood two of the greatest figures of Jewish history! Quick! Get the camcorder! Let’s get some footage, preserve this moment on celluloid. We can use it for the fund-raising we’ll have to do to build the centre I’ve got in mind, The Centre for the Study of Transfigured Spiritual Giants! Like a little boy who chases fireflies and then stuffs them into a bottle, hoping to cling forever to their pulsating glow, Peter plays the fool’s role that he knows so well, but perhaps—perhaps it is in this solitary, off-key interjection in an otherwise luminous moment that we find the interpretive key to this mountaintop experience. Were it not for Peter, this experience would stand head and shoulders above the events before and after it, its numinous quality being eminently more memorable than the humdrum events down in the lowlands.

Life in the Lowlands, Before and After

The events that precede and follow the moment on the Mount of Transfiguration are not luminous in nature. Just prior to the mountaintop experience, Jesus and his disciples have an interesting exchange about Jesus’ identity. Together they had been circulating through a variety of villages, and so Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) The disciples volunteered the various answers they had heard, but then he asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29) Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,” and scored a “perfect ten,” only he blew it by arguing with Jesus when Jesus told the disciples about the suffering, rejection, and death he was facing. (8:31-32) This earned Peter a very stern rebuke (8:33) and he had to listen to even more teaching about suffering, self-denial, and other things he didn’t want to hear. (8:35-38)

If unpleasantness preceded the moment on the Mount of Transfiguration, human need immediately followed it. No sooner had Moses and Elijah vanished than Jesus himself went down the mountain, and the first thing that happened was that a man brought his afflicted son to Jesus and asked Jesus to heal him. (9:17-27) The boy had suffered much; his father said to Jesus, “Teacher, ...my son...has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid...” (9:17-18) It had caused his son to fall into the fire and into the water, almost destroying him. Jesus healed him.

Jesus' rebuke of Peter's urge to freeze a moment of glory, along with the context in the Gospel of Mark, seems to indicate that our ministry is not meant to be spent on a mountaintop! Basking in glory for hours on end may lead to spiritual sunburn! It is not for us to be continually "lost in wonder, love, and praise" ("Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," #592, Hymnal: A Worship Book), skipping about, ecstatically, on spiritual highlands! We truly find ourselves as we experience the pain and sorrow of people in the lowlands! We find ourselves as we lose ourselves in the struggles of real people, as together we look for evidence of God's grace in a broken and troubled world.

It's not that moments of revelation, mystery, and glory are not important. All of us need moments of renewal. We need higher ground on occasion in order to get a deeper and broader perspective on things. We need times of retreat. It is moments of luminosity that keep us going. We need these moments; indeed, because of their memorable quality, our highland moments shape the way we look at things, even things in the lowlands and shadowlands of life, for life in the lowlands is not always a proud existence. We get discouraged. We go astray. We make mistakes. We insult each other; we say things we wish we could take back. We do things that bring on well-deserved guilt and shame. And a highland experience not only gives us a moment of release from the effort of putting one foot in front of the other—or one in our mouth and the other slipping sideways—it also provides a much needed and powerful glimpse of life as it could be.

Mountaineers Return to the Valley

In the rhythm of human existence, however, mountaintop experiences are, like Peter's interjection on the mountaintop, an interruption, a glorious interruption, to be sure, but an interruption nonetheless—a break in everyday lowlands life. The wisdom of the Old Testament philosopher, who said that for "everything there is a season, ... a time to be born, and a time to die; ... a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, 4) recognized that there are rhythms to the gift of life God has given us.

Not only are there rhythms, but few of us could stand the intensity of a sustained mountaintop experience. Even for Moses, who made several treks up the mountain, the brilliance of God's presence was too much, and he had to veil his face. (Exodus 34:33-35) The Old Testament says that a human being cannot look directly at God and live. Even the angels, says the hymn writer ("Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise," #70, Hymnal: A Worship Book), "veil their sight" in the presence of the transcendent, transfiguring, transforming presence of God.

We have to come down from the mountaintop. Moses came down from the mountain and went about the dreary and often discouraging task of fashioning for God a community of faith, a holy people. Elijah came down from his mountaintop experience and once again took up the messy and unpopular role of prophet. Jesus and his disciples came down from their transfigured moment on the mountain and took up, with renewed vigour, their ministry of caring for those in need of care, and confronting the careless and those who deprived people of care.

Mountaintop experiences are exhilarating, but their value only becomes manifest when we come down from the mountaintop. We may be one of the rare ones who are allowed a dazzling, almost blinding glimpse of the glory of God, but its purpose is to fuel our Christian service in the lowlands, so that we can say, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, "This may not be glory, but we can see it from here."

I think Martin Luther King Jr. captured this rhythm of retreat and activism, Christian inspiration and Christian dedication and service, when he told an assembled crowd, “I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” (April 3, 1968).

King came down from the mountaintop to walk in the valley, which for him was the valley of the shadow of death, for he was shot and killed the following day.

We begin, this week, another spiritual journey through Lent, a sombre and introspective journey of the spirit. May the memory of Christ’s glory on the Mount of Transfiguration sustain us through these long, seven weeks, for a disfigured Christ on a Cross will be the dominant image at the close of this spiritual season. The path of Lent will lead us into the valley of pain, violence, and death, but, sustained by the moment of transfiguration, we carry with us the promise that we will emerge from it triumphant! Amen

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.