

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Transfiguration of the Lord, February 26, 2017

A Mountaintop Experience

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys

February 26, 2017

Exodus 24:12-18 Matthew 17:1-9

What is a mountaintop experience? Our scripture readings describe two of them, one for Moses and one for Jesus, Peter, James and John.

Have you ever had a mountaintop experience? Can you recall what it was and when and where it happened? And what does it mean to say that you have had a mountaintop experience? Exactly what is a mountaintop experience anyhow?

Some people might consider an adventure such as traveling to Antarctica to be a mountaintop experience. Or, perhaps it was meeting the love of your life or experiencing the birth of a child or grandchild. Would winning the North Carolina Lottery be a mountaintop experience? Yes, these are examples of major events in your life but would any of them truly be mountaintop experiences in the context of our scripture readings? No, not even close.

A mountaintop experience is something truly unique, something with no parallel. In the context of our scripture readings it is a face-to-face meeting with God.

Does that mean that you have to climb to the top of Mt. Mitchell or Grandfather Mountain to meet God? No, not at all. We can have that mountaintop experience anywhere and can have "near misses" often.

By that I mean experiences where we are close to God or strongly feel His presence, even though we may not see a manifestation of God in a cloud as Moses, Jesus, Peter, James and John did or in a burning bush as Moses did in another trip to the mountaintop.

I personally have had those near misses on more than one occasion as I am sure you have also.

I have always felt that closeness to God when I am out in the woods, or on a mountaintop, or am beside a secluded stream. I saw God in the faces of our children when they were born and certainly saw God in the face of our grandson Emmett when I baptized him.

I saw God right here in this sanctuary when I baptized Hunter and I see God when I talk to her each Sunday. God is all around us --- we just have to look and seek Him out.

In one of his sermons, James MacDonald explained that a biblical mountaintop experience is when we learn something new about who God is.⁽¹⁾ You feel the presence of God with your mind and with your emotions. You are more and more aware of His nearness to you and of His reality.

When I finally realized the strength of God's call to me to enter the ministry, I could sense His presence. I was aware of His presence. I was aware of His closeness to me and I knew that He was guiding me and instructing me. I certainly didn't see Him face-to-face, but I knew that He was there, that He was instructing me and guiding me. In some ways I was denying his call, figuratively being dragged kicking and screaming trying to resist it, but no one can resist the presence of God and what He wants us to do.

Abraham found that out when God told him to take his son Isaac to a mountaintop and sacrifice him there. It was an unthinkable act but Abraham could not ignore God's command. At the last minute, God intervened and Isaac was saved. It was a test of Abraham's faith and loyalty to God. It was Abraham's mountaintop experience.

Moses had two mountaintop experiences, the first when he met God in a burning bush and the second when he received the Ten Commandments directly from God. That latter experience was so significant that when Moses came down from the mountain his face literally glowed with the glory of God's presence. It was so bright that Moses actually wore a veil to reduce the glow.

I certainly didn't glow, at least not outwardly, when I was called into the ministry, but I am sure that I did inwardly. I know that I did when I was installed as co-pastor at First Presbyterian in Bessemer City, NC and again when I was installed as your pastor here at Conley Memorial Presbyterian.

In scripture there are other examples of people encountering God on a mountaintop. For example, Elijah encountered God on Mt. Carmel when God eliminated the false prophets of Baal.

In our scripture reading from Matthew, Jesus meets with Moses, Elijah and God

on the mountaintop in the presence of Peter, James and John. Like Moses, Jesus was transfigured. His face glowed as had Moses' face and his clothes became a dazzling white. The three apostles were awed, just as you and I would have been if we had been there, and they were overcome by fear. With the nature of people today, I am not sure if fear would overcome us, but awe certainly would.

James MacDonald said that a biblical mountaintop experience is something which involves your will. *"When [God] shows up in our lives in a powerful, dramatic mountain top way, it's so that we would do something differently, that we would be different. As we come down off of that [figurative] mountain, we're impacted, not only in what we know and what we feel, but in what we do."* We are transfigured, perhaps not with a glowing face but certainly inwardly.

MacDonald points out that your biblical mountaintop experiences emerge from *"the regular spiritual disciplines of [your] lives."* He reminds us that we should not expect God to show up in our lives in dramatic ways unless we first show up before God in faithful and consistent ways.

Some people will dramatically tell of their conversion experiences, perhaps at a revival that they attended. They might say, "Something wonderful happened to me. God and I really have something incredible going on now."

That sort of attitude is focusing on self, not on God. In a true biblical mountaintop experience you are overwhelmed and overcome with the glory of God, with the glory of Christ Jesus, as were the three apostles on that mountaintop. James MacDonald said it well, *"We don't feel big, we feel small! We are looking for a corner to hide in, because we see the greatness of Almighty God as revealed in the glory of His Son, and it's consuming and overwhelming! That's a mountaintop experience."*

When people have truly experienced a biblical mountaintop experience you can see it in their faces and in their actions. It changes the way that they live.

Has that happened to you? I certainly hope and trust that it has, just as it happened to me.

Alleluia! Amen!

1. James Mac Donald, Walk in the Word, www.jamesmacdonald.com/teaching/devotionals/2005-07-11/