

March 3, 2019 – Luke 9:28-36

My aunt and uncle came out to visit one summer when I was really little. Only six or seven years old, I think. And while it was a perfectly normal trip in most respects, my uncle had a surprise up his sleeve. Because he and my mom had conspired without me realizing it. And he was going to build me a tree house.

It wasn't all that large or impressive. Just a big wooden platform on stilts braced against a tree. A swingset to one side. A sandbox underneath. But I remember playing for hours in that treehouse. Because not only was it my own private space, away from my mom and sisters and everything else. But it was up high. And I felt like I could see everything from on top of it.

Looking back, I realize that I was probably only about 8 feet off the ground. If that. But, of course, heights are always relative. When you're a 4 foot tall child and used to having adults tower over you, an 8 foot high view of the world is pretty impressive.

As an adult, it takes a little bit more to impress me. It takes flying in an airplane on our way to Orlando, like we've done several times now. It takes standing at the top of Sleeping Bear Dunes with Lake Michigan stretching out for miles beneath me, like we did several years ago. It takes climbing to the top of an ancient acropolis in Greece or Turkey, like I did in high school.

Though I've never climbed a mountain, I've had a surprising number of opportunities to stand on high places and look down at some truly remarkable vistas in my life. Places that I will never forget. Places that are truly one of a kind experiences.

So it doesn't surprise me that much when God uses mountaintops for important events. He does it quite a bit throughout the Bible. Noah on Mount Ararat, making his sacrifice to the Lord and seeing the Lord's rainbow of promise for the first time. Abraham climbing Mount Moriah with his son, Isaac, rescued from sacrificing him at the last second. Elijah lamenting his hardships and hearing the still small voice, reassuring him of God's love and protection.

And, of course, Moses. Who, maybe more than any other, has his entire ministry defined by mountaintop experiences with the Lord. Mount Horeb and the burning bush. Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments. And, in our Old Testament Lesson today, Mount Nebo. The third and last of Moses' trips to speak to the Lord, looking down on all of the Promised Land, spread out at his feet.

As Deuteronomy says, Moses knew God face to face. He went onto these mountain tops and he spoke to the Lord for days on end. The relationship between them so close, God's glory so ever-present, that it stuck to Moses like perfume. It surrounded him like a cloud. So that when he stood before the people, he literally glowed with the presence of God.

But it doesn't last. Because, eventually, Moses has to walk back down the mountain. Eventually he has to return to the people of Israel. To the sinful, rebellious people he's been called to lead. So sinful that even as Moses is being handed the commandment, "You will have no other gods before me," the people are sculpting a false god. Dancing around it. Worshipping it. Declaring that it led them out of Egypt.

But maybe that's why God uses these mountain tops. Because that's the nature of an experience like that. It's temporary. No matter how awe-inspiring the view, you know it has to end. I always had to come down from the tree house as a little kid. Just as I had to leave all those other vacation spots. The point of going up onto a mountain is not to stay there. It's to have something to remember when you come back down.

When Noah left Mount Ararat, he remembered that he served a God who would never flood the world again. When Abraham left Mount Moriah, he remembered that he served a God who would fulfill his covenant to make his family a great nation. When Elijah left that cave, he remembered that he served a God who would be with him through every hardship.

And when Moses left those mountaintops, he remembered that he served a God of love and of justice. A God of Law and of Gospel. A God whose Word would be with him until the day he died.

When God brings you to a mountaintop, it's important to remember why you are there. It's important to know what you should take away from it. And that's a lesson the disciples learned when they joined Jesus during our Gospel lesson.

Jesus had invited them to go pray with him on a mountain top. This would normally not be an uncommon occurrence for them. He did it all the time.

But then everything changes. Jesus is transfigured before them. Changed and glorified until his face shines like the sun and his clothes become as white as pure light.

And then, on top of that, Moses and Elijah are suddenly standing right there in front of them. Talking with Jesus like it's the most normal thing in the world. And the voice of God comes out of the cloud, booming in their ears. Reminding them of Jesus' divinity and purpose.

It terrifies the disciples. Amazes them. Makes Peter babble like an idiot. But then, it's over. And they're back to fighting with the Pharisees. And struggling with the Romans. And watching as their Lord is arrested. And falsely accused of crimes he didn't commit. And stripped. And beaten. And nailed to a cross. And dies before them.

And all of a sudden, that mountaintop view is a long way off. Because they've experienced a new mountaintop. The mountain of Calvary. And they've experienced not peace or joy or love or protection. But anger. And sorrow. And pain. And death.

As Moses walked down Mount Sinai and saw once again the reality of sin, so also did the disciples. The reality of a debt that sent their Lord to a cross in payment of it. And it probably left them wondering.

Why bring them onto that mountain of transfiguration? Why show them his glory and majesty? Why prove without a doubt that he is indeed the Son of God, and then do the very least divine thing they can imagine? Die on a cross like a common criminal.

I imagine all these questions were rattling around in their heads. Driving them insane. Until two days later. When they looked inside an empty tomb. And realized that they had missed the point of the Transfiguration. Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Standing on the mountain. Talking about Jesus' departure. Talking about his crucifixion and his resurrection. Talking about the very thing that had just happened.

And what was the one thing that the Father had told them out of that cloud: "Listen to him!" Don't stand there gawking at the brightness of his clothing. Don't pretend that you can hold onto this moment forever by building tents and setting up camp. Remember something from this moment. Take the most precious gift that Jesus could possibly give you.

The knowledge that just when things seem darkest, that is when God's glory is revealed. Just when it seems Jesus has abandoned you forever, that's when he's doing the most to save you. Just when it seems God is impotent and powerless, that's when he's performing his greatest miracle. Just when it feels like death and destruction are everywhere, that's when our Lord is bringing us new life and a new creation.

That moment when Jesus was transfigured before them gave the disciples something precious and valuable. It gave them a glimpse into the wonder of Jesus' resurrection. A glimpse into the joy of seeing him rise from the dead. A glimpse into the majesty of seeing him return on the clouds of glory. A glimpse into a future where everything is right.

But more than that it gave them a lesson. And it gives us a lesson. God's lesson: "This is my Son. My Chosen one. Listen to him!" When the world feels dark. Listen to him. When the future seems bleak. Listen to him. When everything is falling apart. Listen to him.

The day will come when you can stand on the mountaintop with Jesus in his glory, make it your home, and stay there forever. But that day is not today. Today, we leave the mountaintop, we leave this sanctuary, and face a world of death and evil. We leave the mountain top and we enter into the season of Lent. A season of penitence for all our sin.

But we take with us this one gift: the memory of this mountaintop. The memory that we serve a God who is working for us whether he is shining like the sun or dying in darkness. A God who will never leave us nor forsake us, for he has gone to hell and back again for our sake. A God who, regardless of his appearance, always has a plan. And that plan is for our salvation. Amen.