

Our season of Epiphany is relatively short this year, only five weeks. This means that we learn Jesus's true identity TODAY! Today is the day when we get to the really good stuff; today we witness and get to participate in the mountaintop experience.

Have you ever noticed that seekers looking for the master, the wise one, the one with all the answers to life's questions, seem to be always looking at the mountaintop? And that getting there tends to be an arduous climb? That in our language, an incredible, joy filled moment is called a "peak experience?" This image seems to be true across time and cultures and Scripture is no different.

Our Scripture has many mountaintop experiences: for example, Abraham takes Isaac to a mountain when God commands him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice; Moses encounters God on the mountaintop and brings back the ten commandments not just once but TWICE, and Elijah demonstrates on the mountaintop that our God is the one true God over and against the prophets of Ba'al. Meetings with God take place on the mountain top. Luke is deliberately invoking these images and recalling to his audience these stories.

Most meetings with God take place in dreams or through a messenger or an angel. Rare is the meeting when one has a direct encounter with God. Moses has such direct encounters. Exodus does not say that after Moses brought down from the mountain the ten commandments the FIRST time that his face was shining. Rather, Moses burned with anger that the people created an idol, a golden calf in his absence. He was so angry that he broke the tablets upon which God wrote the 10 commandments. God was ready to be consumed by rage at his “stiff-necked people,” and Moses talks God down, convincing God that God must not abandon the Israelites. God relents, and continues to speak to Moses in the Pillar of Cloud, as if to a friend. Moses asks to see God, and God grants his wish. (cf Exodus chapters 32-34)

God also re-writes the ten commandments and when Moses comes back with the tablets a second time, he is completely unaware that his face is shining with God’s glory, that his encounters with the Most High has profoundly altered him, and the change is so dazzling, so beautiful that the people cannot look at him. For this reason, Moses puts on a veil, so that the people can hear the word of God. God’s glory, this unbearable brightness, is but a spark of God’s great love for us and is a sign of God’s

absolute, unwavering faithfulness to us. When we reflect God's glory, it makes us conspicuous witnesses to the Lord of life. Our passage from Luke, invites us to see in God's glory an anticipation of the risen Lord and to find in him each of our destinies.¹

In the verses immediately preceding our reading from Luke's Gospel, the disciples have been told of the necessity of Jesus' suffering and death. To the extent that the disciples were able to take this in, the mood must have been somber. So Jesus takes his inner circle, his closest disciples Peter, James and John on a hike to the mountaintop, so that they can pray together. Just like Moses, the disciples see Jesus face change and his clothes become dazzling white. Further, they get to eavesdrop on the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus. They hear of Jesus' departure, literally his Exodus, his journey to the cross. They are speechless. On some level, they must have been elated. First that they even recognize heros of their faith, long dead, yet they see them. Second, that Moses and Elijah too, suffered persecution and yet God ultimately vindicated them. Surely, God would vindicate Jesus too, beyond the

¹ Thomas W. Currie, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 438.

experience of the cross.² Peter, babbling, instinctively wants to memorialize the encounter by building houses - much like Jacob marked the spot where he struggled with the angel. Luke lets us know that Peter didn't know what he was saying.

Luke is also letting us know that Jesus is firmly within the Jewish tradition, anchored deeply in the faith. Jesus is more than a prophet, he is greater than Moses and Elijah, he is the very embodiment of what God wants from humanity. Now the disciples have their own encounter with God, and they hear very clearly that Jesus is God's son, God's chosen. Jesus is in continuity with the law and with the prophets and to him is the final word in regard to their fulfillment. We too, hear very clearly who Jesus is: God's own chosen, God's son and Jesus radiates God's glory. And we must hear very clearly, just like Peter, John and James: LISTEN TO HIM.

What, specifically are we to hear Jesus say? Recall that Jesus had his identity affirmed at his own baptism. God said to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." (cf Luke 3:22) Perhaps, then, we look no further than our own baptismal vows to distill all that Jesus had to

² J. Paul Rajashekar, "Theological Perspective," *Feast on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, eds, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2014, 268.

say: we renounce evil, the evil powers of this world and our own sinful desires, and we put our whole trust and faith in Jesus's grace and love. We LISTEN to Jesus above all others. We strive to live out these vows in our covenant, by resisting evil and when we fall into sin, to repent and return to the LORD; we share the good news, and we respect the dignity of every human being.

At our Diocesan Convention last week, we lived into respecting the dignity of every human being by passing two resolutions: one which supports giving to all workers a living wage and the other promotes religious tolerance and commends to our attention educating ourselves on mainstream Muslim faith, so that when we see fear and bigotry at work against our Islamic brothers and sisters, we confront it by condemning the evil that it is.

We also listen to Jesus when we devote ourselves to prayer. It is through the daily discipline of prayer that we open ourselves up to the possibility of our own mountaintop experience with the Divine. These encounters sustain our ministry in the face of hostile resistance. For modern examples, we need look no further than Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement or Gustavo Gutiérrez, who's ideas on

liberation theology met great resistance, particularly in this County. For protestant examples I offer Deitrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King. Their faith and their relationship with the Divine sustained them when they encountered terrible difficulties. I suspect that our own Rona Harding might have faced some hostile resistance as the first female preacher of any denomination in this area and perhaps in her work to get Three Oaks Homeless Shelter off the ground. Daily prayer, our communal life in Christ and our service to those in need in Christ's name are the essential messages we need to hear from Jesus.

Later on in Luke, we will hear the disciples urged to take up their cross daily and follow Jesus. In today's Gospel reading we learn without a doubt that Jesus is God's son, we know his journey to the cross is inevitable, and that like Moses and Elijah, God will vindicate Jesus with victory over sin and death. From our mountaintop exhilaration, we draw our faith and strength as we confront evil in the world while bringing others to hope and healing.

In a few days time, I will be inviting you to experience a holy Lent. I hope you will make the time to draw closer to God during this season of reflection, so that you will radiate God's Glory even brighter than you do

know. At the end of this week, our Vestry will join St. George's Vestry on retreat. Together we will seek out our common values and our common mission. This retreat continues our journey toward our own new mountaintop experience, rooting us deeply in prayer, preparing us for new life ahead. Please also take time during the next six weeks to hold our leadership in prayer as we seek to discover where we as an Episcopal community in Southern St. Mary's County are called as we enter into our next chapter of life. May our own mountaintop experience be more exciting than the Super Bowl promises to be, as we seek to know Christ and make Christ known.

AMEN.