

Mountaintop Experiences

"Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain."

(Exodus Chapter 24)

Years ago I was on a horse adventure in the southern desert of Arizona. And about forty miles south of Tucson, rising from the vast stretch of plain, I discovered a majestic peak that the Tohono O'odham people have named Baboquivari. Among the many mountains that encircle the desert, it is this mountain alone that the indigenous peoples identified as sacred. Staring up at its majesty from the desert floor, one cannot help but to understand how these deeply spiritual people came to understand it as the place where their god dwelled.

And as the Hebrews wandered in the desert and tried to make sense of their new life of freedom from bondage, confused and dismayed by the actual realities of their freedom, they too found God on a mountaintop.

It was from the peaks of this mysterious mountain in the Sinai that Moses met their God face to face and then shone with brightness such that the people could not even bear to see it. From this experience on this holy mountain the Hebrews came to wed God in their eternal covenant. And this Sunday we will see Jesus' disciples experience their own revelation as they journey with Jesus to a mountaintop to pray. It was up on the mountain that Jesus' disciples witnessed his transfiguration and where his deepest identity was glimpsed by those who were with him.

"Mountaintop experiences" are what we call those brief moments of spiritual connection and communion with God through which it feels like our earthly existence is transcended and perfected even if just for a moment. It is no wonder that Peter wanted to build dwellings and stay put.

The mountain, as one of nature's most noble goliaths, has come to represent for so many people the very nature and symbol of transcendence. Just think of how our love affair with mountains pervades our life in the Blue Ridge. Our mountains are ancient and their majestic peaks have worn with their great age, but they still hold such deep, deep attraction.. In spiritual life that metaphorical ascension into the thin and ephemeral air of the mountaintop is where we might catch a glimpse at a revelation of the Holy.

These experiences can be as rare as they are holy, I know in my life I can only remember three significant mountaintop moments and all of these happened before I was ordained as a priest in the Church. These experiences were not magical, miraculous, or otherwise spooky, but like the disciples, I found it better not to speak of them very much, primarily because words were insufficient to the experience.

All I can really say is that what I experienced was a brief, but overwhelming sense of God's love; a feeling that encompassed not only myself but *everyone* and *everything*. It was after one of these experiences that I was able to truly taste the wonder of the gift of forgiveness and let go of a long held painful anger toward someone; an anger that had colored my life for some time. I felt liberated to love more because I had experienced the *completeness* of God's love and out of that brief moment my view of the world was forever changed.

I believe my mountaintop experience had to meet those challenging and difficult realities of my everyday life or they would have been pointless; I do not believe that these moments come to us for ourselves alone, but so that we might love ourselves and one another more completely.

The story of the transfiguration of Jesus loses its power if it does not include the moment when Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain.^[1] These precious experiences are meant to change the way we move through the world. They are never solely a private experience of spirituality that is removed from our work a day lives. They are a promise wrapped in a vision; a vision meant to carry us down into the ordinary, the hard, and the ugly, and they are a glimpse of the unimagined possibilities so present at ground level.

"...May a window of light always surprise you.

May the grace of transfiguration heal your wounds.

May you know that even though the storm might rage yet not a hair of your head will be harmed."

Harry O' Donohue

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+

^[1] Lori Brandt Hale in *Feasting on the Word* quoting Thomas Groome in *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry, The Way of Shared Praxis*.
