

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, open our hearts and minds that we may know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry and hurting and dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Scripture: Mark 9:2-9

We've been to the mountaintop, we've seen the glory of our God, He is here, in the valley low, he's here, I feel it in my bones, our God, He is here, we are the body of our God...¹

So goes the chorus of Mountaintop, a song by one of my favorite contemporary Christian bands, The City Harmonic.

Many of us have had some type of mountaintop experience, those times when we felt like we were on top of the world, really happy, confident that we knew all the answers, could solve any problem that came up. Or we felt that we were really close to God, really in tune with God's plan for us. In those moments we were excited and alive, and everything seemed new.

The moment might have come at some exciting event in your life: graduation, baptism, your first kiss, your first day on your first job, your wedding, the birth of a child, maybe even catching your very first fish. It might have been something really spiritual, like a week at church camp or a church retreat. Or it might have been something of a smaller, quieter nature, like a very intimate conversation with your father or mother when you felt

¹ The City Harmonic. "Mountaintop." *I Have a Dream (It Feels Like Home)*, iTunes app, 2011.

that they honestly understood what you were saying and why you felt the way you did.

As I prepared my sermon for today, I looked back on mountaintop experiences that I have had over my lifetime. One of those experiences occurred during Local Pastor Licensing School in 2006. Once your calling to ministry is endorsed by the local church and the District Committee on Ordained Ministry has acknowledged your call, Licensing School becomes the first step in a long process toward Ordained Ministry in the United Methodist Church. As I look back on the first weekend experience, I can still remember what a powerful weekend that was for me.

We call these "mountaintop experiences," and oh how we hate to come down off that mountain! We want to hang on to that moment for as long as we can. "Let's just stay right here and let the rest of the world go by for a while," we say. But to freeze that one moment in time shuts off the possibility of the next moment.

In our Gospel reading for today we hear the writer of Mark give his version of the event which we call "The Transfiguration of Jesus." Luke and Matthew also contain an account of this strange occurrence, with some minor variations in the telling. It's one of those rare moments we were just talking about, one of those mountaintop experiences of life, which somehow defy adequate description and challenge us to stretch our concept of reality to the point that we usually wind up asking the question, "Did this really happen?" Events such as the Transfiguration somehow connect us with the mystery of creation and eternity.

For Jesus it was a time of confirmation and affirmation of his ministry. For Peter, James, and John it was a brief glimpse of the transcendent, a peek at the reality that lies just beyond everyday life.

But notice that Jesus quickly led the disciples back down off that mountaintop – in spite of Peter's desire to pitch a tent and camp there for a long while. Jesus led them back into the daily routine of teaching and preaching and caring for the broken and hurting people of the world they lived in, he led them back to the reality of life in the valley.

And here's the thing, the same Jesus who leads us to those spiritual high places also leads us to care for the hurting, broken-hearted children; to minister to the homeless; to bind up the wounds of a broken world, or simply to tend to the needs of a brother or sister.

When you experience the mountaintop, don't forget the valley below. Jesus is there in the valley in that foul-smelling nursing home; Jesus is there in the valley of fears and the tears of everyday life; Jesus is there in the valley of the joy of the birth of a child; Jesus is there in the valley of the aching loneliness of the shut-in. Jesus is there at the repeated failures of his followers.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the preacher who moved to a new Church. This particular church didn't have a lawn mower for the parsonage so he was looking for someone to either mow the lawn for him or to sell him a used lawnmower. One day he saw a young man going by pushing a lawnmower. So the preacher asked him, "Hey, looking for a job?" The young man said, "Sure." It turned out that he was mowing yards and trying to earn enough money to buy a bicycle. This preacher was kind of young and didn't mind mowing the yard so he told the young man, "Look, I've got a 10 speed

bicycle that I never ride any more. What do you say we trade the bicycle for the lawnmower."

Well, the young man was ecstatic. They swapped and the young man took off on the bicycle. He rode around the block and came back to see the preacher standing in the same place wiping sweat off his brow. The preacher waved the boy over and said, "Hey, I've pulled on the rope a half a dozen times and this lawn mower just won't start."

The young man said, "Preacher, I hate to tell you this but it's a special kind of lawnmower. You have to cuss it to get it to start."

The preacher looked at him and said, "Well, I've been in the ministry so long I don't think I can remember how to cuss."

The young man grinned and said, "Pull on the rope some more and it'll come back to you."²

The point is this, we ought not stay on the mountaintop so long that we forget what it is like to be in the crowd, we shouldn't forget what it is like to pull on a stubborn lawn mower. I know from personal experience, that mowing a lawn is a sure way to keep your feet firmly in the valley.

But Peter needed the mountaintop. We all do. It's there that he learned he needed to listen to Jesus. God himself helped Peter understand this. We all have had those moments or we wouldn't be here, moments when we learned we needed to listen to Jesus. But let me tell you a wonderful little secret. Peter did not go up the mountain to find God. God brought Peter up that mountain. God revealed himself to Peter. We don't find God up on mountains. God finds us.

² Traditional Illustration. Accessed at sermons.com, March 2, 2019.

In the book, *Unconditional Love*, Father John Powell tells of a young man named Tommy who was a student in his college class, *The Theology of Faith*. Tommy turns out to be the “atheist in residence” in the course. He constantly objected to, smirked at, or whined about the possibility of an unconditionally loving God.

At the end of the course he asked in a slightly cynical tone: “Do you think I’ll ever find God?” Father Powell decided on a little shock therapy. “No!” he said. “Oh,” Tommy responded, “I thought that was the product you were pushing.” Powell says, I let him get five steps from the door and then called out: “Tommy! I don’t think you’ll ever find him but I’m absolutely certain he will find you!” Tommy shrugged a little and left my class and my life.

Later, I heard a report that Tom had graduated, and I was duly grateful. Then a sad report, Tommy had a terminal illness. Before I could search him out, he came to see me.

“Tommy, I’ve thought about you so often. I hear you are sick.”

“O yes, very sick.”... “Can you talk about it?”

“Sure. What would you like to know?”

“What’s it like to be only 24 and dying?”

“Well, it could be worse.” “Like what?”

“Well, like being 50 and having no values or ideals, like being 50 and thinking that booze, sex, and making money are the real ‘biggies’ in life.”

“But what I really came to see you about,” Tom said, “is something you said to me on the last day of class. I asked you if you thought I would ever find God and you said, ‘No!’ which surprised me. Then you said, ‘But

God will find you.' I thought about that a lot, even though my search for God was not at all intense at that time.

"One day I woke up, and decided to spend what time I had doing something more profitable. I thought about you and your class, and remembered something else you said: 'The essential sadness is to go through life without living. But it would be almost equally sad to go through life and leave this world without ever telling those you loved that you had loved them.' So I began with the hardest one, my dad.

"He was reading the newspaper when I approached him. 'Dad?' 'Yes, what?' he asked without lowering the newspaper. 'Dad, I would like to talk with you.' 'Well, talk.' 'I mean, it's really important.' The newspaper came down three slow inches. 'What is it?' 'Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that.' The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I could not remember him ever doing before. He cried, and he hugged me. It felt so good to be close to my father, to see his tears, to feel his hug, to hear him say that he loved me.

"It was easier with my mother and little brother. We shared things we had been keeping secret for so many years.

"Then one day I turned around, and God was there. Apparently, God does things in his own way and at his own hour.

"But the important thing is that he was there. He found me. You were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for him."³

³ Powell, John. *Unconditional Love*. Excerpted at sermons.com illustrations. Accessed March 2, 2019.

On the mountain of Transfiguration God reveals himself to us. He finds us. Reveals to us his plan. It's found in Jesus. We are to listen to him.

Have you come to a place in your life where you have listened? Listened to his parables, learned from his teachings, watched his miracles, felt his sacrificial love? If you haven't you need to go up. Experience the mountaintop.

If you have already listened to his parables, learned from his teachings, watched his miracles, felt his sacrificial love, then you have been there. You've been to the mountaintop, you've seen the glory of our God, and you've experienced that glory for yourself. For many of you it may have been a long time ago that these things happened. But if you have experienced the mountaintop...don't forget the valley below.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.