

The Scenic Underlook

By: Douglas Forrester

Crozet United Methodist Church

Transfiguration Sunday - February 14, 2010

Luke 9:28-43a

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here." While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

In my travels, I have seen several scenic overlooks. We have two of them just a few miles from here on Afton Mountain, and several on the Blue Ridge Parkway and Skyline Drive. They are so beautiful that it is no surprise that they are so popular. The week that Tracy, Ellen, and I moved into the Crozet United Methodist Church parsonage was the week of the fourth of July. On the evening of the fourth, we ate supper with Tracy's parents in Staunton, and then drove home to Crozet at dusk. We decided to stop at the higher of the two overlooks on Afton Mountain, and when we did, we joined with people from all over Virginia in watching fireworks displays taking place in eight separate small towns down in the valley.

However, I have, in all of the many miles that I have driven, yet to come across a scenic underlook. There simply does not seem to be the same demand for them that there is for the overlooks. For some reason, we love the view of the valleys from up high much more than we love the view of the valley from valley itself. Driving from here to Waynesboro, especially in the wintertime when the leaves have fallen from the trees, affords us opportunities to see houses that seem impossible to reach, ones whose location was most likely selected in order to give its residents a lifetime of mountaintop views.

In this morning's text, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John to the top of a mountain, probably one called Mount Tabor. These are the same three disciples who had witnessed Jesus doing amazing things like calming a storm, healing a demon-possessed man, healing a sick

woman and raising Jarius' daughter from the dead. Jesus had sent his disciples into the world with the authority to preach, to heal, and to drive out demons. Jesus had just fed 5,000 with only a little bit of food, and Peter had just said to him, "You are the Christ of God," only to hear Jesus reply that he (Jesus) must be rejected, suffer, and be killed.

This transfiguration text concludes our season of Epiphany; a season began with the arrival of the wise men and the baptism of Jesus. The season of Epiphany begins with God saying "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased" and ends with God saying, "This is my Son, the chosen. Listen to him!"

They see Jesus transformed before their eyes, suddenly wearing clothes of dazzling white, a sign associated in the Old Testament with the presence of heavenly beings. What's more, they see Jesus talking to Moses and Elijah, who were believed to have never died, but to have been living in heaven. Moses, who brought the covenant and Elijah, the prophet whose return to earth would be a sign that the Messiah was soon to follow, standing with Jesus. Is it any wonder that Peter wanted to build dwellings for them, so that they may enjoy this mountaintop experience for a longer while?

In all of my years of preaching on Transfiguration Sunday, one thing I never noticed until this week was that Peter only suggests building three dwellings; one for Elijah, one for Moses, and one for Jesus. Nowhere do I see him suggesting that dwellings be built for himself, James, or John. For years, I have suggested that Peter was trying to find a way to keep himself atop the mountain, but now I am not so sure. Granted, Luke does write this text in such a way that he leaves open the possibility that the cloud that overshadowed them, the cloud out of which the voice of God came, interrupted Peter just as he was about to suggest building a dwelling for himself. Either way, the mountaintop experience was not meant to last for long. Luke tells us that by the next day, there were at the bottom of the mountain again.

And what a contrast the bottom of the mountain was to the top! How different the scenic underlook was from the scenic overlook! At the scenic overlook, the disciples experience what is called a theophany; a visible manifestation of God. Yet in down, in the shadow of the mountain, there is a large crowd, and in it, a man is shouting for Jesus to look at his son. His son was possessed by a demon that causes the boy to shriek, to convulse, and to foam at the mouth. The man then indicates that he tried to get the disciples to help, but they were ineffective.

Have you ever had the experience of having a terrible morning at work on the day you return from vacation?

This morning's gospel reading is such a study in contrast. One moment, we are up on the mountain with Jesus. We can see and hear God. We receive affirmation that the Jesus we call the Lord is indeed the one who is the fulfillment of the prophecy and the law as we see him, glowing in clothing of dazzling white, standing with the prophets of old, and suddenly, almost with a lurch, we are in the valley, where ministry is not ethereal, where ministry is in our faces, as it

were. We are surrounded by the mob, the demon possessed, and what Jesus calls a “faithless and perverse generation.”

Have you ever returned to work after a vacation, surrounded by noise, email, a ringing phone, demanding people, a pile of work, and dreamed that you were back on vacation?

But that is the thing: when we only expect to encounter God on the scenic vistas, we miss seeing God as God is. Sometimes our faith can be the same way: we have those “mountaintop experiences” of God, and we expect them to last forever. Therefore, we search and search for mountaintop worship, mountaintop preaching, mountaintop Bible studies, and mountaintop music. We wish to build homes atop our mounts of transfiguration, only to find Jesus hiking back down to the valley, because it is there that God sends him, and in so doing, sends us, because our God is an incarnate God who lives in our valleys. We tell God’s story through the lives of the saints, those whose names we know, and those whose name everyone knows, all of whom are remembered not for their mountaintop experiences, but for their work in the shadows of those mountains. Mother Teresa is not remembered for her mountaintop experiences, but for her work in the valleys of India. Father Damien is not remembered for his mountaintop experiences, but for his work with those afflicted with leprosy on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. John Wesley is not remembered for his mountaintop experiences of faith but for the 250,000 miles he travelled on horseback to minister to those who sought new life in Christ.

The story of the Transfiguration of Christ is about his disciples learning to see him in a new, transformative way, and what it means for us, for his disciples today, is that by the power of the Holy Spirit, our valleys can be transfigured into mountaintops as we encounter a surprising God in surprising ways, in surprising people, in surprising places.

To be sure, our God is present in the vista views of the mountaintops, where we can but speak the words, “God of all creation, of water earth and sky, the heavens are your tabernacle, glory to the Lord on high,” but our God is also present, often in the most real visceral way, in food pantry in the basement of the church, amidst the wires, pipes, cinderblock, and duct work. God is present in the stained glass beauty of the sanctuary, but God is also present in the classrooms, in the educational programs, even in the meetings where God’s people gather to pray and plan to be a part of God’s future.

Sometimes the grace of God makes us feel, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “as white as snow,” but sometimes to be in the places of the living Christ means that we are in those places where the air is hot, and our hands and faces are dirty.

Be careful when you follow the living Christ up the mountain, but be especially careful when he asks you to follow him to a place where he will offer you an amazing, scenic view of God, because what we see and where we see it has the power to surprise us, to shock us, to upend our notions of God, especially our notions of where the God we know in Jesus Christ will be found.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.