

Last Sunday in Epiphany
Exodus 24:12-18, Psalm 99, Mathew 17:1-9
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My older brother, Doug, would say that mountain climbing has been his principal form of joy for nearly his entire life. His major life decisions have revolved around mountains and excursions to remote places from Mt. McKinley in Alaska to Mt. Toubkal in Morocco. His affection for high places rubbed off on me mostly because I wanted to enjoy his company. I know the exaltation of finally reaching a tall summit after laboring up steep inclines for hours.

Once after a long, hard climb in the rain and fog to the top of Mt. Katahdin, the tallest mountain in Maine, my deep sense of relief and accomplishment was diminished when I heard children's voices in the mist. At the summit marker, we discovered two small children with their parents who had also reached the top by another trail. They were gleefully dancing around as if they had arrived by car.

Last summer Juanita and I climbed Mt. Monadnock in southern New Hampshire with my brother while he was temporarily home from Ukraine. It was a gorgeous day with magnificent views in every direction. Not surprisingly, we shared the expansive, rocky summit with hundreds of others. It wasn't the time or place to commune with God, but it was a rare treat to spend several hours with Doug, doing something he loved so much.

Mountaintops have always been thought to be places of thin air, clarity of mind and removal from the lower reaches where chaos reigns. Certainly, in biblical times, when heaven and God were thought to be literally up in the sky, mountain peaks afforded one a better chance of encountering the divine. We still speak of mountaintop experiences or peak experiences for those extraordinary moments in our lives.

Jesus took his inner circle to the mountaintop that day because he needed some time apart from the busyness and clamor of the crowds below. Whether he knew what would happen, we aren't sure, but something incredible occurred. Jesus became radiant with divine glory. He shone not with reflected light from another source but from the realm of heaven – very light of very light. Not only that, but two giants of the faith suddenly appeared alongside him. Moses was initially chosen to lead God's people from slavery in Egypt, and then was singled out to receive the commandments of God on another mountain. And Elijah, Israel's most revered prophet, encountered God on a mountain as well and later was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire.

As they were talking, it seems Peter couldn't help himself. Maybe he even interrupted them to suggest building three cottages for their overnight accommodations. We love Peter – always doing or saying something to fill the void and dispel the awkwardness. Was it Peter's way and our way of wanting to control a situation we can't manage? We all know the saying, "Don't just stand there, do something." I am certainly guilty of saying or doing something on more than one occasion when just quietly minding my own business or standing there was in order.

Peter may also have wanted to preserve this holy moment, make it last forever. Jesus, Moses, Elijah and Peter are quite a foursome. As we know, exhilarating experiences are hard, if not impossible, to preserve or recreate. They just happen, and we have to savor them and let them carry us for a while.

There was a beautiful moment in *Downton Abbey* the other night, when Daisy, a young and not-so-pretty cook's assistant was being seriously wooed by a young suitor who wanted her to come back to America with him. He was forlorn when she said no. Asked if she was discouraged or feeling blue herself, she replied, with her cute English accent, "Are you kidding? His interest in me will buoy me up through next summer."

We waste our time trying to repeat deeply satisfying moments rather than living forward with the hopeful anticipation that new opportunities will arise, and we are once again surprised by grace. If we are attentive and expectant, divine outbursts will regularly pierce through the ordinary.

It seems to me that the transfiguration is an unprecedented explosion of glory maybe only eclipsed by the resurrection itself. It's the greatest epiphany at the end of the Epiphany season. Jesus' true nature, his divinity, is on display for a shining moment to carry him and his select trio of disciples forward through the events of Holy Week and the cross. This is the sort of profound revelation few human beings will ever experience except here in scripture.

We stand with Peter, James and John on this summit as we contemplate the season of Lent, which lies below and ahead of us. Hopefully, we will deny ourselves at least a little because Jesus sacrificed his all for us.

We can and should ask God to shine divine light through those aspects of our lives that have become mundane, ordinary, lackluster. Maybe some light has gone out of our marriage, and our spouse has lost the thrill he or she once held for us. Pray to see once again the blessing and gift from God that our spouses truly are.

Maybe our job or daily routine has become just that – routine. Pray for God to shine through our friends and co-workers to make every minute more significant as we too add value to each life we encounter.

Maybe we feel that our lives don't matter much, that we haven't realized our full potential, or we are just going through the motions. Pray for God to show us that who we are and what we do does matter to our families and friends and people we've never met – how in even the smallest task and every prayer, we are unselfishly doing God's will and contributing to a better world for someone else.

Lastly, consider what happens after this unique moment passes. Peter's plans for lodge construction have been interrupted by a bright cloud that envelops those present. From it a voice thunders forth, which drives the disciples to seek the safety of the ground where, we are told, they are "overcome with fear."

The next thing they feel is Jesus' hand upon their shoulders and his familiar voice of comfort and assurance: "Get up and do not be afraid." The startling, swift moving encounter with God and his elites is over. It was both sensational and horrifying. Jesus gives up his radiance, leaves behind his heavenly visitors and the voice of approval to get back the important business at hand – tending his flock. He bends down to console ordinary people like you and me who may also be afraid or confused or disoriented.

Jesus never forgets, even though he is God, high and lifted up and seated at the right hand of the Father. Jesus never forgets that his first priority is us – flawed, weak, strong-willed, defiant at times and yet always trying. Right now and always he is reaching out to us and asking us to stand and walk with him into whatever awaits us down here in the varied circumstances we face. AMEN.