

Last Sunday after Epiphany
2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50, Mark 9:2-9
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Today, this last Sunday of Epiphany seems a bit like our Fourth of July celebrations. There are lots of fireworks. In 2 Kings, we heard that Elijah, the greatest prophet in Israel's long history, is taken up into heaven at the end of his life in a flaming chariot of fire. And on the mountaintop in Mark's gospel, Jesus lights up the sky for a brief moment. Both flashes of brilliant light are unique in the scriptures, and yet light, fire and the accompanying whirlwind in 2 Kings and the cloud in Mark are all symbolic of divine presence.

Remembering the burning bush and the dark thundercloud that covered Mt. Sinai when Moses communed with God, the pillar of fire by night and the pillar of cloud by day that led the Israelites in the wilderness, the whirlwind from which God spoke to Job, and the flames that appeared on the heads of the disciples at Pentecost, clearly fire and cloud meant God was somewhere in the vicinity. In fact, when asked how I picture God, the Father, I can't help but think of a billowing, low-level cloud.

Mountaintops were once thought to be the place one went to get closer to heaven and therefore to God. Since we no longer believe that heaven is literally up there, we climb mountains for very different reasons. The most famous quote by George Mallory when he was asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest was, "Because it is there." Mountain climbing today is about the challenge more than a chance encounter with the divine.

Reaching a high summit is still exhilarating, however, if for the panoramic views alone. On this last Sunday of Epiphany, we read about Jesus' most significant mountaintop experience so that, along with his disciples, we might glimpse a future reality. In a few short days, we will have to leave the mountain height to begin the church's most rigorous season of Lent.

Beginning this Wednesday, Lent will last 40 days, during which time we are to be more cognizant of the ways we let God down and disappoint the people nearest us by our failure to be more selfless. That means showing Valentine-like love 365 days of the year.

From the high ground today, we can see beyond Lent to Easter. We still need to go through Lent, but it will have a glorious ending when we, too, will be raised to new life after we've worked and prayed, studied and fasted to help us further die to some of our old self-absorbed ways.

In 2 Kings, Elisha, Elijah's student and successor, is told that if he can watch his mentor go up in the chariot of fire and the whirlwind, he will get the double share of Elijah's spirit he requested. What does this mean exactly? The best explanation I could find is that Elisha is being asked to witness a one-time divine event involving a forest fire-like inferno, especially when you add the high winds. It would be tempting and natural to turn away or run away in the face of such fury, but Elisha sticks with it just as he has earlier stuck with Elijah even when Elijah asks him to stay back three times.

Elisha wants and is ready for the deeply spiritual life for which Elijah has groomed him. He is willing to be singed, burnt and tossed about by the forces that will come against him as God's prophet, just as Elijah had been before him.

How much are we willing to endure for the deeper spiritual life God wants to give us? How disciplined are we willing to be in prayer, study, worship and service to see divinity occasionally or frequently breaking through things earthly?

Elisha follows Elijah and then watches the maelstrom with eyes wide open. Peter, James and John follow Jesus up a high mountain and experience terror when Jesus is all aglow, celestial visitors appear from nowhere and a voice sounds forth from an ominous, overshadowing cloud. In the face of these shocking wonders, Peter wants to do something – build three condos – not knowing how else to manage his own angst. It has been thought that Peter wanted to preserve this glorious moment, but if he is truly afraid, as the text says, then maybe he wants to get the three enclosed so he can separate himself from the situation. When we are afraid, we'll do just about anything to make the danger go away.

In this case, a more appropriate response might have been to recognize the greatness of the moment and the privilege of being there with Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Perhaps the disciples could have fallen on their knees, taken off their shoes or clapped in delirious appreciation for such a glorious gift.

It just goes to show how unspiritual Peter, James and John were even after having spent so much time with Jesus. No wonder Jesus tells them not to tell a soul until after the resurrection. They couldn't begin to understand, let alone explain to anyone what just happened up there.

This, then, makes us wonder if the mountaintop miracle was for Jesus alone or for the disciples. Clearly his shining moment meant the Father was with him if not in him. We don't know what Jesus, Moses and Elijah talked about. It's possible they discussed what might happen to Jesus when he took his ministry to Jerusalem. Were they offering him encouragement to stay the course even if it would lead to his arrest, torture and death? I think so.

The voice from the cloud was definitely addressed to the disciples. "This is my Son, the Beloved; Listen to him!" Moses, the law giver, and Elijah, the greatest prophet, spoke for God earlier, but now Jesus has come to finish what they started. Listen to him.

We might conclude, then, that this particular rocky mountain high was for both Jesus and the disciples and now for us as well.

One doesn't have to live long to realize that life consists of peak times and trough or tough times. Our faith informs us that while we can't stay on a high, we won't stay in the valley of the shadow of death forever either. Our God is always with us and wanting to break through to us in small, mostly, but occasionally in big resplendent ways – weekly communion always, light streaming through the clouds, the sweet fragrance of a flower, an unexpected smile or genuine love when we least expect it or don't deserve it. Or we just might be given the opportunity to perform a much needed special service to another of God's children. God won't ever stop trying to reach us, make contact and draw us deeper into union with the One and Three.

I want to conclude with an enlightening, transfiguring story told by Joan Chittister in her book, There is a Season. It's a story from Judaism about a village rabbi who would disappear into the forest every Sabbath evening "to commune with God" or so his congregation thought. On one such evening, the congregation elected a member to follow the rabbi and observe firsthand the holy encounter. Deeper and deeper the man went following the rabbi into the woods until he came to a small cabin where an old, crippled, dying Gentile woman lived.

Once there, the rabbi gathered wood for her fire, cooked for her, and swept her floor. When all the chores were complete, the rabbi returned to his modest home next to the synagogue.

Back in the village, the people demanded of the man they had sent, "Did our rabbi go up to heaven as we thought?"

"Oh no," the man answered after a thoughtful pause. "He went much higher than that."
AMEN.