

Sunday, February 11, 2024
2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9
“Visions on a Mountaintop”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

Who is your favorite Superhero? Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Captain America? Mine has always been Wonder Woman! Come on, she is the warrior princess. With her really cool invisible airplane, her indestructible bracelets, her powerful tiara, and her special whip, the golden Lasso of truth?! So awesome. In another church I served the children and adults put on a play at Christmastime called A Super Christmas. It starred all the superheroes, who go around panicked because they hear a new superhero is coming to earth to save the world. They even join the shepherds to search for this superhero, only to discover – it's the baby Jesus. It's very cute.

Well, I think this story from Mark's Gospel of the transfiguration of Jesus has many of the elements of the story of a superhero. One author writes, "There's an arduous trek up a mountain; a tightly knit company of friends on a "mission" together; the appearance of other-worldly figures in dazzling light; the transformation of the hero into an equally dazzling figure; (cloudy entrances), a command from a powerful voice from another dimension; a determined descent to battle those other powers back home". Jesus the new superhero. Right? Well, Jesus is not exactly a superhero - or is he? (1) Today, let's explore this incredible moment on the mountaintop.

Today ends the Season of Epiphany which began with the journey of the Magi. Transfiguration literally means to change figure or form and that is certainly what happened on the mountain top. We are then introduced to the Season of Lent as they leave the mountain and Jesus begins his long hard journey which will lead all the way to the cross. And all this previews Easter with the white clothes, voices from angels, and glory all over again.

Well, if you haven't noticed, Jesus likes to go up the mountain from time to time, to get away from it all. To spend time alone and in quiet prayer. But on this occasion, he brings with him his 3 favorite disciples and something incredible does happen, and we find ourselves immersed in apocalyptic imagery: Glory, light, heroes from Israel's history: Elijah and Moses. There is a reason why these two appear on that mountain. In the passage read from 2 Kings, we heard about the end of Elijah's career and how he must concede his power and position to his younger apprentice, Elisha. Elijah goes on some strange journey from Gilgal to Bethel, to Jericho and the Jordan River, and Elisha stays by his side to the end. And in the end we learn that Elijah is simply removed from the scene on a chariot of fire.

And the best-known earlier example of a dazzling face transformed by being in the presence of God is that of Moses. After Moses has been in conversation with God about the future life of God's people, he descends from the mountain and he is reflecting the light of God's glory in a way that he must cover his face so he doesn't frighten the people. In Deuteronomy we learn that Moses was buried by God.

And so because Elijah was simply removed from the earth by God and Moses' grave was never found, these two men of the faith were thought to be available for God to send back. God would send them to inform humankind that God's reign was at hand. So, it is no accident that these two appear with Jesus on the mountain.

And the three disciples are confused, in awe and somewhat terrified. Peter wanted to build three dwellings, like booths, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He wanted to hold this moment forever, to capture Jesus' dazzling brightness, to make sure Moses and Elijah didn't get away. But before Peter could finish, a cloud overshadowed the disciples and as suddenly as the vision came, Moses and Elijah were gone and Jesus stood alone, looking as he had when these three fishermen saw him for the first time. From one angle some claim that Jesus replaced Moses and Elijah. But Jesus didn't replace them. He incarnated their mission and ministry. The mission of Moses, the law-giver of a new law and Elijah, first of the Prophets with a new prophecy. (2)

If you recall when Jesus was baptized God speaks directly and states to Jesus ("You are my beloved Son"), here and now - God addresses the public ("This is my son, my chosen"). And in place of a private personal address ("In you I am well pleased"), now there comes a command addressed ostensibly to all hearers ("Listen to him!") Now Jesus becomes the divinely chosen precursor of the turn of the age. He will not be a superhero as we understand it, but more of a martyr as one who lays down his life and allows us all to be transformed, transfigured, through him.

One summer while on vacation with extended family in Aspen, Colorado - a stunning place to visit in the summer. We were asked if we wanted to go for a little hike, with a guide. Sure, sounds awesome. Well, those who live in Colorado and hike in Colorado have a very different definition of a "little hike". The hill was a mountain. The path was rock climbing. The short walk took hours. But once we hit the very top of the mountain, there was a clearing which had a beautiful long table set with food and drink. It was spectacular, stunning. Although I remember drinking the water more than the food I ate! It was the most beautiful mountain top experience, literally. And yes, we piled into the caterers' vans to go back down. We weren't foolish!

Many mountain-top experiences are called "thin places", where the seemingly normal gap between us and God becomes very thin. And God, seems very close. Every once in awhile, we are presented with life transforming moments. Aha moments. Mountaintop experiences. Not necessarily religious moments or spiritual moments or moments of inner peace, but thin places. Moments where you know there is a power much greater than our own, a creator, redeemer, sustainer of life far beyond our comprehension. You know these moments. The "shiver up and down our spine, I can't believe this is actually happening", kind of moments. From witnessing the most beautiful sunset or sunrise, to hearing your child cry for the first time after birth, to the first note of loving words received after a tragic loss, to receiving a radical act of kindness.

Besides hearing my daughter cry for the very first time after birth, my moment came with my son at 3 years old. You see, my son had some difficult challenges in early childhood which delayed his speech. And we spent a lot of time in a special speech class. Putting peanut butter in different places in his mouth to strengthen his tongue, rewarding him for making certain sounds with goldfish snacks. Slowly, he began to say dada, baba, all the first sounds. Then one day I went to pick him up from his Parents Morning Out program, and he simply turned and ran toward me, as all the children did, crying out, "mommy". Over three years I waited for that. It took my breath away and brought tears to my eyes.

Do you know some 20 years later I ran into the director of that program and she also still remembered that very moment. You should hear him talk now! These kinds of moments transform regular valley living into mountain top experiences of transformation. These “wow” moments take us outside our mundane, day to day living and cause us to pause for a moment and take in what we are seeing, what we are hearing, what we are experiencing. What are some of yours? Share with me if you like, I’d love to hear yours. Sometimes we keep these moments in silence, too precious or personal to share. Like the disciples had to hold this moment in silence for a time, but this was because it was too dangerous and personal to share. But if you are able to share that moment with others, that light with others, you can radiate the light of God, the love of God and begin to transform others through your experiences.

Let me give you another example. I met Prue Allen, when I was serving in Pastoral Care Ministry at the Old Lyme Congregational Church. Prue was just out of the hospital and in a rehab facility. Legally blind by this point with terrible arthritis in her hands, I found her attempting to write with a large marker on a wide lined yellow notebook. She said it was her memoir. And she told me that NPR was going to interview her the next day because it was Martin Luther King Jr. Birthday weekend and she knew the King family. At first I thought, okay, sure, NPR is coming to this little Apple Rehab to interview you. Right! But the next day my colleague called to say, turn on NPR Prue is being interviewed! And from then on, we had long visits as she told me her story.

Prue grew up in CT and while in college in the early 1960s, volunteered for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to be sent to help encourage folks, mainly African Americans, to register to vote. This led her to Atlanta and straight into what was first called “The Black Power Movement”. Her stories left me speechless. She was part of the Freedom March Across Mississippi, endured tear gas, encounters with police, was Corretta Scott King’s personal secretary for a couple years, returned to the family right after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed to help out and met people like, oh Rosa Parks, Bobby Kennedy, Sammy Davis Jr., just to name a few. Prue died just over a year ago, before her memoir was published but this week, a close friend of hers called me to say, “we did it, we published her memoir and we want you to have a copy, after all you are mentioned in the acknowledgements.” It is called, “The Accidental Activist: A Retrospective Journey”. Here is my favorite quote of hers, “if you have something you are willing to die for (for her it was equal rights), it will give you something to live for. You will never be without the knowledge that you have a reason or a purpose.” (p. 72)

People, moments, events, can transform our understanding of what it means to have faith in God, what justice and love looks like, and move us to begin feeling an understanding of God’s omnipresence in the entire world and beyond. The Transfiguration story from Mark is a story we too often try to explain. What happened on that mountain when Jesus went to pray? Why did his clothing become dazzling white? How could Moses and Elijah be there when they lived so long ago? Was this a dream? How could all three disciples have the same dream? Or was this a moment for those disciples to see who Jesus really was. What was transfigured on that mountain was not Jesus but their perception and our perception of him. Jesus was not only a man, a human being, but God made flesh, divinity among us. But here’s the thing. Jesus comes back down the mountain. He didn’t stay in that dazzling glory with God.

One pastor writes, “Jesus takes his disciples with him up the mountain, after a period of revelation, transformation, and transfiguration, they come back down again. After all, this

transfigured state, attended by Moses, Elijah, and his disciples, was much closer to the state of glory that Jesus deserved than what's coming. Yet he comes back down. Down into the mundane nature of everyday life. Down into the nitty-gritty details of misunderstanding, squabbling, disbelieving disciples. Down into the religious and political quarrels of the day.

As Paul sings, 'though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.' (Phil.2:6-7). Jesus' downward movement from his rightful place in glory to embrace our lot and life out of love is, in a very real sense, the essence of the gospel. Jesus coming down, all the way down into our brokenness, fear, disappointment, and loss. And, of course, it only gets more so, as we will soon watch our Lord travel to the cross, there embracing all that is hard, difficult, and even despicable in life, in order to wrest victory from death itself. So trusting the mercy of the One who came down the mountain – the One who entered the dark places of the world and still seeks out the dark places of our lives – trusting this One, perhaps we will be honest enough to name what is broken and hurting in our lives and [our] world. (3) Maybe even becoming an accidental activist.

The disciples wanted to hang out with their superhero's basking in the glory but they too had to come back to reality. Sometimes God gets lost in the shuffle of our lives and that's why we need to get out of the valley of our life in order to gain some perspective. To look at what is happening around us from a different angle of vision. Worship on Sunday mornings is one way to climb that mountain out of the valley. On top of the mountain the disciples came to the light and saw, and they knew that from then on, they must listen to him. Up on the mountain, we too can see and be in Jesus' light and when we climb back down into our valley, into the deep dark places of our hurting and broken lives, we will see that God has been there all along. So, look, listen and remember those visions on the mountaintop, those aha moments, the thin places; for they will make our everyday living in the valley that much more easier, bearable, manageable. And they may even help create Jesus into our everyday Superhero, who has come to save each and every one of us. May it be so, Amen.

(1) Henrich, The Rev. Sarah. "Commentary on Mark" www.workingpreacher.org

(2) Lundblad, The Rev. Barbara. "Visions of Jesus and King on the Mountain."
www.workingpreacher.org.

(3) Lose, The Rev. David. "He Came Down" www.workingpreacher.org.