

“Revelation Comes from Elevation”
Sermon on Sunday, February 11, 2024

Dear church,

This is one of the most mysterious stories of the gospels, Jesus taking the select three, Peter, James, and John out to the movies. Well, it wasn't the movies, but something like that. Surreal. Magical. A show to remember. For an hour or so, they were transported into a different world and saw their teacher... what's the word? Transfigured! Kissed by the light of God! The four walked up a high mountain, we are told. I don't know what even qualifies as a high mountain in northern Israel, but it wasn't the Colorado Rockies, maybe just a glorified hill. Yet, this story tells us that revelation often comes with elevation... it comes when we go above the ground level of life, when we aren't enmeshed in day-to-day activities. How often do we turn off the autopilot and think about our lives? That's what this story is about. And it may be difficult to do with everything that keeps us busy every week, every weekend, every waking hour of the day... Do we take time to leave our bubble and elevate our game? C'mon, let's go to the movies with Jesus! Come to the 211 South Main Street Theater in North Wales, an old classic movie theater with beautiful woodwork, faithful membership, and an antiquated sound system. But the sound system is not the main thing when we come to church, is it? It's something else.

Elevation. Spiritual elevation.

An ideal church service may provide us with new perspectives that elevate our spiritual insight: the songs, the music, the prayers, the rituals, the message. Usually, it's nothing like what we heard in the gospel. There is no dazzling white, just off-white choir robes and the pastor's famous coffee stains on what is supposed to be a white robe. Elijah and Moses do not appear before our eyes except if our imagination is trained. And nobody wants to stay in church beyond the service hours, especially not on Super Bowl Sunday, right? But... What may happen at St. Peter's is that the sun shines onto the communion wafer as the pastor lifts it up into the air, transfiguring the body of Christ – in a way. What may happen in our church on a regular Sunday morning is that the person Jesus may get a little bit under your skin, tease you, become more real to you. And hopefully, all of us, as we listen to the Word of God, find ourselves elevated and see things that we haven't seen before, in us, in our world, in the everyday reality that often feels anything but magical. Get up at five. Get dressed. Go to work. Make sure there is gas or electricity in the car... Eat. Sleep. Get up again! We all need to spend time on the mountain, in the presence of God from time to time, because revelation comes from elevation. That's what I hear in the gospel. Many people and cultures have heard the same thing throughout history, across the globe. Elevation matters.

Holy Mountains, mountains of revelation abound in our world, that should tell us something... from Machu Picchu in Peru, the old Inka holy site, to Mount Olympus in Greece, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Mount of Olives in the gospels, Mount Rushmore in South Dakota where some of the most iconic US presidents are carved in stone in an area

that was long sacred to native tribes. The wise people of this world have always known: Revelation comes from Elevation.

One of my favorite mountaineers, the old and wise Reinhold Messner who came from a poor family in southern Tyrol, a pioneer who set many mountaineering records and is still alive at age 80, having spent much of his life in the thin air of the highest peaks on earth, once described his enlightenment with the following words: "In my state of spiritual abstraction, I no longer belong to myself and to my eyesight. I am nothing more than a single narrow gasping lung, floating over the mists and summits." I find those words fascinating and inspiring.

When you go up, either physically or just mentally, in your mind, you will open yourself to deeper insights and a better perspective. That's one of the lessons of this story of the Transfiguration of Jesus, traditionally read on the Sunday before the season of Lent begins, before we are introduced to the suffering of Jesus. The timing is no accident, no accident at all. Suffering is part of life and if you haven't encountered it directly or indirectly, count yourself blessed. Most of us have experienced suffering in our families, among our friends and relatives, in our church, among the people we know from work or school. Physical suffering, mental suffering, spiritual suffering, aging, loss... The religions of the world, all of them, teach us that suffering is part of life. Amidst joy, success, and fun we also get to deal with the shadow sides of the human condition, some of us very severely so. And the million-dollar question is... how do we handle that? I can give you the names of a few people in church whom you can ask because they know better than I do, but let me say this on their behalf...

Most of them will say: "One day at a time, one foot before the other!" Most people who suffer greatly will tell you, "The question of how you deal with it is mute. You have no choice. You just deal with it." There is obviously a lot of practical truth in those words. What this story from the gospel adds to that is the benefit of gaining perspective, looking beyond our suffering. Jesus, before he went on his journey to the cross, was elevated, heard God speak to him through a cloud, heard him say to the disciples, "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" I hear this also as a command to us to listen to those who are suffering among us because they have something special to offer and Christ is revealed in them in a special way. They are loved in a special way. That's how this story speaks to me today. I believe that this was God's way of preparing Jesus for a very difficult time in his life. He wanted him to remember these words, "This is my son whom I love." He wanted him to remember that the suffering, horrible as it would become on the cross, could not separate him from the love of God.

To be continued next year when we are elevated again to the Mountain of Transfiguration. But remember: Revelation comes from Elevation. Amen.