

On the Mountaintop

Matthew 17:1-9

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Last week I saw the movie *A Man Called Otto*, starring Tom Hanks. If you haven't seen it, I recommend it. It's a dramedy—a cross between a drama and comedy—and is based on a best-selling Swedish novel *A Man Called Ove*. The focus of the movie is a recently retired man, whose wife has died, and whose only child was lost in a tragic bus accident.

Angry and depressed, with nothing to live for, Otto attempts suicide four times in the course of the movie, and each time he's thwarted in humorous ways by annoying neighbors who unwittingly pull his focus away from death.

This movie is about a metamorphosis, a transformation, of a cranky, obstinate, curmudgeon of a man, who slowly crawls out of his darkness and finds community and purpose through the loving embrace of a young mother and her family who have just moved into the neighborhood. Gradually they become his new family, and by the end of the movie we see a completely different Otto, loving and generous. He gives his car to a teenager who had been kicked out of the house for being transgender. He buys a new truck, loads his new family in, and as he drives off, says, "Now this is living."

I've always been fascinated by how people change, those moments of profound insight when somehow the way we look at ourselves and the world around us is re-arranged, transfigured. The unconditional love of a new friend that sparks change. Many of us grew up when moments of change came at a retreat or summer camp. Perhaps it happens at a weekend conference, an all-night discussion across the dining room table, a quiet time of reflection, in therapy, or an honest and heartfelt conversation with a good friend, or study of the scriptures that yield some new and profound awareness.

The Gospel writer Matthew describes the disciples Peter, James, and John hiking their way up to such a moment on the mountaintop, led by their weary Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. A cloud overshadows them; the Old Testament figures Moses and Elijah appear, and the face of Jesus shines like the sun, radiating the presence of God. "This is my beloved son, with whom I am pleased. Listen to him," announces a voice from the heavens.

Overwhelmed with fear and awe, the three disciples fall to the ground. "Get up," Jesus says to them "Don't be afraid." They raised their eyes and there Jesus stands alone, radiant, seen by the disciples in an entirely new light. As the three prepare to leave the mountain with their leader, the disciples now take with them a re-arranged, "transfigured" vision of Jesus, and, as they soon discover, a re-arranged, "transfigured" vision of themselves.

The disciples, like many of us, might wish all of life could be lived on the mountaintop. If only the week at summer camp could be brought home and relived during the school year. If only the exhilaration and insight and renewal of our mountaintop moments could happen every day.

But we don't create mountaintop experiences. They usually come as unexpected gifts from God. The disciples didn't climb their way up the mountain by themselves. They were led there by their master.

Nor do we ever stay on the mountaintop for very long. Peter, just before heading up the mountain, stood in a valley of disbelief when Jesus told him the Messiah would suffer and die. And, just as the three were feeling comfortable and "at home" on the mountain, Jesus decides to lead them down its slopes, towards Jerusalem, down into the valley of the shadow of his death.

God leads us to the mountaintop--those precious and remembered moments of insight and transfiguration--for a reason. To help us cope with our life in the valleys. The valley of fear. The valley of anxiety about what tomorrow will bring, the valley of a major health crisis, or deteriorating relationships, or despair about the future of our country. Indeed, even the valley of the shadow of death.

As a child growing up in Northern California, one of my favorite trips was the drive west from Lake Tahoe down Interstate 80 into California's central valley. About 10 miles from the foothill town of Auburn, you make a wide turn in the highway and for just a few seconds you have a spectacular view of the valley floor, looking across the foothills towards Sacramento. In high school it was a rite of passage to park near that bend in the road at sunrise, a breathtaking picture postcard of a view.

A couple of years ago I was back in California and made that drive again, anxiously waiting to catch that panoramic view I remembered growing up. But when we made that wide turn in the middle of the afternoon, I couldn't believe my eyes. Know what I saw? Smog! Dirty, ugly, brown smog! I couldn't even see the valley! From my mountaintop view I gained a whole new perspective on what I would be breathing on the valley floor.

When was the last time you gained a new perspective in the valley you're living in? Robert Coles, a sociologist who has spent his career studying the spiritual life of children, documents what I think we all know to be intuitively true. The reason children have such profound experiences of God is that they are open to them. Their field of vision is very wide, unencumbered with the years of filtering, skepticism, and routine that comes with growing older.

For many of us, particularly us heady Presbyterians, mountaintop moments are what we experienced years ago on high school youth retreats or at summer camp. Over time our field of vision has narrowed, and our spiritual life has become, well, a routine. Isn't it sad that it often it takes a crisis to jar us out of our spiritual myopia.

A minister friend of mine in Illinois, after a long struggle with cancer, expressed to his congregation on a recent Sunday one of his mountaintop moments as he stepped out of doors for the first time after many months of debilitating chemotherapy:

"As I crossed the threshold, sunlight greeted me. This is my experience and all there is to it, really. And yet, so long as I live, I shall never forget that moment.

"The sky overhead was very blue and very clear, and very, very high. A faint wind blew off from the western plains, cold and yet somehow tinged with warmth. Everywhere in the firmament above, in the great vault between earth and sky, on the pavement, the buildings, the golden glow of sunlight. It touched me, too, with warmth, and friendship, with blessing.

"And as I basked in its glory there ran through my mind those words of the prophet about the sun that someday shall rise with healing on its wings. In that instant I looked about me to see whether anyone else showed on his face the joy I felt, but no, there they walked, men and woman and children, in the glory of the golden flood of

light. But so far as I could detect, there was none to give it heed. Then I remembered how often I, too, had been indifferent to the sunlight, how often, preoccupied with petty and sometimes selfish concerns I had disregarded it. And I said to myself how precious is the sunlight, but alas, how careless of it we are. How precious, how careless! This has been the refrain sounding in me ever since.”

Mountaintop moments, even small ones like this, give life in the valley a whole new perspective. They also can give us new strength.

Peter followed Jesus up the mountain a fearful man, scared that his master's prediction of his coming suffering and crucifixion might indeed be true. His worst fears on the mountaintop are confirmed as Jesus' face shines like the sun. The Son of God speaks with authority. What he predicts about his death must come true.

But the transfigured Jesus does something about Peter's fear. He touches him. "Look up," he says. "Do not be afraid." And with the assurance of his touch and the comfort of his words, Peter gets up, and follows Jesus down the mountain, back into the valley, with all of the difficult days of Holy Week ahead of him, no longer afraid.

Often God gives us new strength in our mountaintop moments for life in the valley. Calming fear. Healing hurts. Promising a future. Widening our field of vision. You see, Jesus isn't the only one transfigured on the mountaintop. We are, too!

When was your last mountaintop moment?

I believe God gives every person moments on the mountaintop, irrespective of age. For if there are valleys to traverse, there must be mountains to climb. There would be no valleys if there were no mountains.

The question is, are you ready to go hiking? Are you ready to trust the leader enough to guide you up the mountain? Are you ready to risk letting go of all of your cynicism, and all of your orderly routine and opening yourself to moments of transfiguration, allowing God to re-arrange your perception of yourself, widen your vision on your life, and give you new strength for the valley below?

Are you ready to go hiking? That's the question of this Transfiguration Sunday. Because if you are, life in the valley may soon be very different.

Amen.