

Sunday 2nd March

Rev'd Margaret Middleton

Matthew 17:1-9a

Mountaintop Experience

Hands up if you enjoy reading? Over recent months I have rediscovered my love of reading especially mystery stories and historical fiction. It is marvellous how a well written book will have you quickly involved with the plot and after you've finished, you can reflect on its structure, on its use of language, on the author's world view and all the other literary features that makes for worth while reading.

Have you ever considered any of the writings in the Bible in the same light – that is, in the light of its literary worth? Especially the books of the New Testament. Have you ever considered that the writers gathered material, oral stories, written pieces, and structured them in such a way as to present a narrative with a plot, a climax, an ending and particular point of view?

Many believe that is one of the ways that we can read the gospels.

When literary criticism is applied to the Gospel of Matthew which is our focus gospel for this year, we find a carefully crafted, well written narrative which presents Jesus of Nazareth as the long awaited Messiah of the Jewish nation, and a prophet greater than Moses- a leader, teacher and law-giver. The pivotal point in the story is what is often called the Transfiguration of Jesus or the Mountain Top experience. Again there are striking similarities with Moses but it is here that Jesus authority is declared and he is shown to be greater than Moses and indeed the Son of God. From this point the narrative moves to the inevitable conclusion of Jesus ministry. Jesus will lead the people into the promised land of peace with God and freedom from the bondage of death through his resurrection. The other gospels present a different view of Jesus which we don't have time to explore this morning..

And as with all good literature, even those statements I have made are open for discussion, disagreement and further exploration.

Now what has all this to do with today's reading from Matthew about the Transfiguration? Everything and very little. Let me try to explain.

Clearly in a literary sense, this mysterious event is very important in the gospel narrative. Yet if this event is to mean anything for us today I think we need to look it at from a different perspective. So, is there another way of reading this story of the scene of indescribable splendour, light and glory?

One way is to consider the story from a heart perspective and find a truth that is easily dismissed by the cynical. And what is that truth? I believe this event invites us to understand that God can and does break into the ordinariness of our lives with extraordinary splendour and mystery.

Do you believe that? If you are sceptical that's OK. But I want to suggest we often miss these moments because we are too busy or too preoccupied. We don't take time to climb the mountain.

Let me read you a story to help understand what I mean. Kimberlee Conway Ireton tells of her experience in *Weavings – a Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*. She writes of an experience that I can relate to.

“After my son was born, I experienced a deep depression. I cried a lot. My baby cried more and would not be comforted. I felt impotent and enraged and wanted to hit him, which made me afraid to pick him up. Instead, I hid under my covers weeping while he lay in his cot wailing.

After what seemed like hours of this, but was probably only minutes, I crept into his room, feeling guilty and contrite, held him tenderly, protectively, and we cried together. I lived with a constant sense of fear, anxiety, and sadness that erupted into full-blown panic whenever I thought of the future, of days like this, full of emotional instability and sometimes overwhelming sadness, stretching out endlessly before me.

In the midst of that time, which I mostly remember as if it were shrouded in thick, dark clouds, I can recall one moment when those clouds parted and I was able to see a reality beyond the one in which I was trapped.

It happened, of all places, in the kitchen. I was washing a bunch of spinach in the sink when suddenly I became aware of how beautiful it was—the crinkly dark green leaves with their bright, white veins, the thick yet silky texture of the leaf as I gently pulled apart each fold to wash inside it, the way the leaves glistened in the sunlight slanting through the kitchen window as I lifted each washed leaf out of the water and placed it on the towel beside the sink. Time seemed to stop - or at least cease to matter - as I wondered at the beauty of the spinach.

She continues - I had washed spinach countless times before this and have done so scores of times since, and I have not been able to recreate this experience. I cannot reproduce the sense of awe and timelessness and holiness I felt that day. Sometimes the world simply unfolds its mystery and we happen to be in the right place at the right

time, and in the right emotional or spiritual space to notice the mystery, to receive it, to be encountered by it.” *pause*

If you stop and think about it, perhaps you have had a similar experience. Maybe in the kitchen, maybe while watching a baby sleep, maybe watching a bird learning to fly or maybe looking at a sunset. How many of us have experienced amazing coincidences or remarkable sensations of presence and love and yet never speak of it? Who would believe us?

Some of you may have had an overwhelming sense of God’s presence as you have received the communion elements – ordinary things of life, bread and drink which have literally become for you holy. Such experiences are not something you can anticipate nor are they necessarily repeated.

I wonder if mountain top experiences are given to us to fill us with awe and delight, to strengthen us, to encourage us to rise above all that holds us back from joyous living and actively serving one another?

I believe such moments can and do transform our living just as they did for Jesus. What did they do for Jesus himself? With each encounter with Divine Mystery, Jesus became stronger, kinder, more daring. He could come down from the mountain top enabled to continue teaching, healing, preaching and proclaiming the Good News of God’s grace and mercy despite fierce opposition and scepticism. It enabled him to climb another mountain alone where he died and it carried him on to Easter Sunday’s glorious dawn when the Beloved Son was revealed to the whole world as the true Messiah and Saviour of the world.

May God open our eyes and hearts to receive the gift of his glorious, mysterious in-breaking presence in the ordinariness of our living. And may our encounters with God transform our lives. To God be the glory. Amen.