

## Coming Down From the Mountain

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dn. Mark LaGory on February 14, 2010.*

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, my strength and my Redeemer."

Frederick Buechner tells the story of watching Federico Fellini's classic film "La Dolce Vita". As the film opens, a helicopter flies slowly through the sky. Hanging from the helicopter is a life-size statue of a man dressed in robes with arms outstretched so that he looks as if he is flying by himself. The helicopter first flies over a field where some men are working. They wave their hats, hop around and yell, and then one of them recognizes the statue and shouts in Italian, "Hey, it's Jesus!" whereupon they start running along under the helicopter, waving and calling to it.

But the helicopter keeps on going, passing over a building, where on the roof there is a swimming pool surrounded by sunbathing women. The bathing beauties look up and start waving. This time the helicopter circles back to hover over the pool where, above the roar of the engine, the passengers try to get the womens' telephone numbers, explaining that they are taking the statue to the Vatican and they'll be happy to return as soon as their mission is accomplished.

It's a powerfully ironic scene. Buechner, however, was fascinated by the audience as much as the film. During this scene, the audience laughs at the incongruity of the whole thing. There is the sacred statue dangling from the sky on the one hand, and the profane young Italians on the other- the one made of stone, so remote, so seemingly out of place there in the sky on the end of a rope; the Italians, boisterous and full of life.

But then the helicopter continues on its way, and as the great dome of St. Peter's looms ahead, for the first time the camera zooms in on the statue with its outstretched arms. For a few moments the screen is filled with the face of Christ - and suddenly there is no laughter. Nobody laughs, says Buechner, because there is something about that face that makes them silent - the face hovering there in the sky and the outspread arms open for all. There is no sound in the theater at all. It is as if all in the audience know this face, a face that if only for a moment, they truly belonged to. The face in the sky--- and a connection, that takes everybody by surprise.

Such moments of connection, of revelation don't come often enough for most of us, but they are the one's we all seek; mountaintop moments when we suddenly recognize the face

of God in another, or when we look up at the stars on a clear night and are overwhelmed with a feeling that all is well, or when we hear God's voice deep within us in a moment of prayer. It is a time, Buechner says, when something comes to life, some spirit, some hope that is so precious that not even a cynic can laugh although he might be tempted to weep. In such moments we experience the thin space between heaven and earth, and we know that the unseen God is with us, suddenly fleshed. These precious moments take us by surprise.

Today's gospel describes one of those moments--- the moment when Jesus is dramatically revealed as the Christ to His disciples. No Oscar winning film director could have created a more powerful scene--- guest appearances by the patriarchs, booming voices and special effects from the heavens, exquisite backlighting surrounding the face of Jesus. Oh I get Peter, I'd want to hold onto this time too. I get wanting to settle down on the mountain top with what feels comfortable, and reassuring. And that is the point. You see this story, like much of scripture, is not just about God and Jesus and people of long ago, it's about us. It's about our mountaintop experiences, our moments with God, and how those moments affect the rest of our lives-- what we do between Sundays. How are we being transfigured, transformed by our time within the walls of this sacred space? Does it change our behavior with our families, with our co-workers, with the members of our community? The story of the transfiguration is as much about what we as Jesus' disciples do in the valley as what we experience on the mountaintop.

For you see there is also that part of the gospel in brackets, the part we didn't have to read today except that your pesky deacon insisted on reading it. I read verses 37-43, the optional ones, because I don't think they are optional at all. They are just as critical to understanding our life in Christ, as the story of the Transfiguration itself. We really need to hear them, for it is the sobering truth about our spiritual life.

Just as we are nourished and transformed by the mountaintop experiences and our life inside these walls, we are also called to follow Jesus into the valley. Oh sure we crave the peace and comfort of the temple, we are motivated to seek it, we need it. But there is another side to our spiritual life as well. For Jesus beckons us to live out our faith in the everyday world, a wild and wooly place. When Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain, reality hits them like a brick wall. And what do they do? Nothing. Perhaps the crowd's demands scare them. Maybe there are too many needs to fulfill, too many hurting folks and so all that spiritual energy from the mountain seems to drain from them. Life in the valley is hard, and the disciples lose the confidence they gained on the mountain quickly, yet

Jesus has work to do on this noisy messy place called earth and we are called to be his hands and feet in these endeavors.

For just as much as we crave those miraculous “God moments”, when life in its unexpected and unaccountable ways awakens us and gives us purpose and meaning, God beckons us to go beyond these nourishing moments to participate in His hopes and dreams for this broken world. **You see the messy truth of our faith is that every time we invite Jesus to come into our life.... He brings his friends with him!** The poor and the needy, He says, are all around you, welcome them as you would welcome me, assist them as you would assist me.

A few years ago Robert Putnam, a Harvard sociologist did a study of 36 communities in the United States, and I had the privilege of participating in the Birmingham portion of that study. Of those 36 communities, Birmingham ranked first in the % of people who said religion was important in their life. Ninety percent of Birmingham’s respondents said that they were religious. This is truly astounding because America ranks as one of the most religious nations in the Western hemisphere, and so Birmingham turns out to be a very religious place. That, I think, could truly be something to be proud of. And yet what does that statistic really mean? Should that fact be more disturbing to us than comforting? Let’s walk in the valley for a moment. For you see while we claim to be people of great faith, we are also one of the most segregated cities in America, and it turns out that we have one of the highest levels of racial distrust in the country. Sundays don’t change that.

I think there is a real risk in America that the story of Jesus has become more fancy than fact. Today’s gospel very clearly proclaims that our faith is to be lived not possessed. It is a verb not a noun. A healthy spiritual life should combine mountaintop experiences and valley life, prayer and action, Sabbath and stewardship. If we are truly serious about our faith and its transformative nature, how can we tolerate the great health disparities that exist in our country between rich and poor? How can we feel content with a healthcare system that leaves more than 45 million people without insurance? How can we live with the fact that Alabama ranks 45<sup>th</sup> in the nation in the percent of children living in poverty, 46<sup>th</sup> in school dropout rates, 48<sup>th</sup> in infant mortality and in children’s overall well-being, and 49<sup>th</sup> in the gap between rich and poor?

Is Jesus more like the aloof concrete figure dangling from the sky in the opening scene of La Dolce Vita-- apallingly irrelevant to our daily lives? Do we find comfort in the temple

only because it protects us from the masses of needy and those different from us on the outside? Are we more interested in pitching a tent in the sanctuary, than following Jesus into the streets?

I love the comfort of this place with its talent for hospitality, and its lovely caring people. It nourishes me. It by the grace of God, and God's people, has transformed me. I have grown spiritually. I have had mountaintop experiences because of this church--- encounters with homeless families through BHN, deeply moving sermons from this pulpit, incredible sacred music from this choir, extraordinary moments in Sunday School. As an aspirant to the diaconate, I was mentored here by John Claypool, Joy Phipps and Lee Spruill. My ministry has been supported and encouraged by David Powers, Rich, and all of you here today. These experiences have been wonderful, nourishing.

But I can't help but believe that we are on the cusp of something even greater here at St. Luke's, something truly transforming. I heard it in the sermon Rich preached a few Sunday's ago on the role that money can play in faithful lives. I felt it at the Claypool lecture when before nearly 3000 people Denver Moore told his story of salvation and then sang to us from some deep place that only God can dwell. What better time to contemplate the transformative nature of our faith than this Transfiguration Sunday, and the time of Lent that lies just ahead? Do you see the face of Jesus in this? Not the Jesus dangling from the sky, distant and lifeless, but the face of Jesus in Fellini's close-up shot, the face that stops everybody in their tracks, the face that once you see it, changes everything?

The Transfiguration story signals that moment when we finally let go of what is and reach out for the possibility and hope of what can be and who we can be. It is that moment when we finally realize that there is something in this world larger than any one of us and realize that we are a part of that something larger. We are at a time in our history as a nation when the natural reaction to all the bad economic news might be to curl up in fear and seek the safety of the mountaintop or the security of the church's walls. But this is precisely the time when Jesus beckons us to come down into the valley and walk with him. We are nourished on the mountain, but called to the valley. For when we invite Jesus into our lives, he always brings his friends--- the poor, the homeless, the children, the prisoners, and suddenly we become St. Luke's of the Valley.