



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

God in the Valley_ - The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost - 8_7_2022

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Today's gospel describes what is perhaps the quintessential mountaintop experience as a small group of disciples, exhausted from their hike, struggling to stay awake, witness the veil from the sun-worn face of their charismatic, occasionally combative rabbi suddenly lifted to reveal the brilliance and the radiance of Jesus in all His glory. Such religious experiences confound simple, straightforward definitions, but suffice to say they are moments when the mystery of God comes crashing into our life in a way that is unmistakable and very likely breathtaking.

And notice the word is transfiguration, not transformation. Jesus is not changed. He is who He always has been. Transfiguration is to be seen differently. What changes in these moments is our ability to see with a new clarity, the reality of God's glory that has been right in front of us all along. Celtic Christians referred to such moments as "thin places," when the veil, which separates heaven and earth becomes so thin that for a time, it seems to disappear entirely. These mountaintop experiences are impossible to adequately describe. Words never seem to do them justice, but you know it when you see it.

Perhaps that is why they decide to tell no one because encounters with God need to be experienced, not explained. In fact, they are probably best described by the impact that they can have on us. They can be moments of great clarity and enlightenment. They can make our heart sing and leave us with a profound sense of peace, joy. They can be experienced as a kind of wakeup call that shocks us out of our complacency and knocks us off our high horse. Perhaps most importantly, they can point our lives in a new direction and help us to break through whatever it is that's been holding us back from following God's call in our life.

Have you had a mountain top experience? Chances are you have, at least according to studies by Gallup and Pew. According to them, anywhere from 40 to 50% of Americans report having had a profound religious experience or a spiritual awakening of some kind. That's actually quite remarkable to me, but what's even more amazing is when you break it down by denominations. Guess who is number one, at least among the main line? That's right, well-mannered, famously reserved, properly ordered Episcopalians. Between 70 to 80% of us report having had such an experience. And I find that truly amazing. In part, because I'm not sure we really talk about them very often, perhaps we know they

might sound a little crazy once we put them to words, or maybe we're just following in the disciples' lead and keeping it to ourselves.

But whatever the case, I have to admit that when I heard that it made me a little jealous because as blessed and profound as these moments are, as undeniably powerful as they can be, they never seem to be around when I need one. For whatever reason, God doesn't come crashing into my life with blinding light and pyrotechnics. At best, God seems to speak to me in small nudges and subtle whispers that sometimes can take me years to finally pay attention to. And even then, I can have a hard time discerning is that God's voice talking or my own ego that I'm hearing?

And if any of that describes your experience, we are not alone. Mother Teresa to the surprise of many, made it clear in her many letters and journals discovered after her death, that she had spent the last several decades of her life feeling utterly abandoned by God. Like many of the great saints who had come before her, she too was left to wonder why, why did God seem so distant? They even wondered, is God deliberately denying us such moments of consolation so that we might be taught to seek Him for His own sake, rather than some spiritual high or reward of some other kind.

The point is if you've never had a mountaintop experience, or if you feel like it's been a long desolate time since your last one, you are not being left out. You are not unworthy. In fact, you are in really good company. Take one of the red prayer books with you home today and thumb through the back at the Psalms. And you'll notice that like Mother Teresa, they are filled with laments of God's apparent abandonment and desperate pleas that He might finally appear and make His power known. But God is not a divine waiter and faith, for it to be faith, can't be conditioned on God showing up in all the ways that we'd like. God's comings and goings are without question one of life's great mysteries, but it's also one that we don't need to solve.

Our work is not to figure out God, but to listen to His son. And that is a lifetime of work for any of us. So I am here today on behalf of the valley, because focusing on the mountaintop, it seems to me, can actually be a distraction to our life of faith. For one, it can reinforce the persistent idea that there is somehow a separation between the holy and the earthly, between the spiritual and the everyday, between the sacred and the ordinary, that somehow God is in one, but not the other.

Think about that. How many of our metaphors for Heaven speak of it as being somewhere up there? But Jesus talked about Heaven on Earth, in the here and in the now. In fact, the whole point of the incarnation, the whole purpose of God coming into the world to live and to breathe, to eat and to celebrate, to grieve and to suffer as one of us was so that He might wipe away once and for all the idea that there is a separation between God and God's beloved, between the

perfection of heaven and the brokenness of the world. God is in all of it. Jesus is Lord over it all. That's why the temple curtain is torn in two at the Crucifixion. The barrier between us and God has been removed. And God no longer resides in temples, but in our hearts so that we might each become a temple to the Holy Spirit, with our very lives. Right here, down in the valley.

And if we spend our time continuously seeking the next transcendental moment or the next spiritual high, jumping from church to church, trying to recreate that glorious worship experience that we once had, signing up for every retreat on some magnificent vista somewhere, always looking for God in this spectacular, we can miss out on Christ in the ordinary; in the doing of laundry, trips to the grocery store, waiting in traffic, in the face of a coworker, the need of someone to listen, in an overworked waiter who is feeling invisible, or in the sun-worn face of a homeless person, hoping to make it through one more day.

And that is good news to me because the most powerful moments, the most powerful God moments in my life have never been on mountaintops. They've always been in the valley. As amazing as the day was when I was baptized in a glorious cathedral, surrounded by an angelic choir, being told that I was sealed as Christ's own forever. As unforgettable as that experience was, it wouldn't be until years later in the midst of a gut-wrenching breakup, beaten down and exhausted from heartbreak and an overwhelming sense of failure and shame, that I found myself truly putting my life in God's hands. And then experiencing what it was like for God to catch me, catch me in the waiting arms of a community of friends who never judged, who never took sides, and never wavered.

As profound and powerful as it was to witness the birth of our girls, a literal miracle in so many ways, I saw God's glory in the countless ways that friends and strangers alike came together to care for us, to cook for us, to pray for us, to hold us together as we spent every night of that first month at Gianna's bedside in the intensive care, holding her tiny hand as she fought for life. No, my mountaintop experiences, they always seem to happen in the valley and they come so well disguised, so well disguised that it's not until they are well into the rear view mirror of my life that I can look back and marvel at the radiant glory of God.

Finding God in the valley means dwelling in the valley, not trying to escape it or avoid it. Christianity isn't God's evacuation plan into the next world. It's God's restoration plan for this one. And we are the ones who've been called to finish the work that Jesus began. Mountaintop experiences when they do happen, yes, they can be much appreciated fuel for the journey. They can provide an occasional uplift, but we are not called to dwell there or to try to contain them or to build monuments to them or to recreate them, but always to return to the valley so that we might join in its transfiguration by seeing Jesus in the sun-worn face of the least, the lost, the left out. Until the day dawns and the morning star

rises in our hearts and we awaken to a new Heaven and a new Earth, God dwells with us and we with Him.

Amen.