

Sunday February 19 ,2023

Last Epiphany

All of today's readings find us somewhere on a mountain. We're spoiled living in a mountainous way as in these parts our landscape is surrounded by peak after peak. Having moved here from a hilly part of CT., at 1000 feet of elevation, to our present home at about 1600 feet, I expect I'll always be a flatlander to old time locals.

I've stood at one time or another on the summits of most of the local peaks and all of the highest ones in the northeast. My personal best was at about 14,000 feet in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park. No matter the summit, be it a crystal-clear day or one covered with wind, clouds or fog there's something exhilarating, stimulating, with the whole world below you while you're on a mountaintop.

But you can't stay there. Yes, it's easy to be fooled when the sky is clear and the wind is only a whisper. You can see forever, exhausted from the climb or not, it's a being on top of the world feeling that is hard to define and equally hard to hold on to. For the time you spend on the summit you're "King of the Mountain".

Although we as believers know that God's presence can be found anywhere and everywhere, today, from psalm to Gospel, his presence is manifested on mountain tops. Within the psalm God sets his Son "upon his holy hill of Zion". The story of Moses's ascent of Sinai, where he encounters God, eventually returning with the 10 Commandments comes to us from Exodus. The Gospel has Peter, James and John accompanying Jesus to the mountain top where he's Transfigured, right before their eyes. Finally, from 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter, we hear the Gospel story presented as fact to make the writers point.

Each and every reading presents to us an encounter with the living God in a life changing way. Moses manages to stay on the mountain 40 days. Jesus and his disciples for, I don't know, maybe an afternoon, who knows as it's not so much the time but the encounter that's important. What does matter is what us mere mortals do with the experience of God up close and personal.

The disciples, we're told, want to make a shrine and stay awhile. That's not what mountain top experiences are for as you can only stay just so long up there. Like any life altering event we have a choice of what we make of it. Moses, shining face and all, could have ditched the stone tablets halfway down the peak as they must have been a pretty heavy carry. Likewise, the disciples might have chalked up their encounter as too far out there to actually be believable, referring to the experience as being only a dream.

I firmly believe those mountain top experiences, encounters with the living God, are meant to be carried back to the plains and valleys where we spend the majority of our days. Those times God speaks to us most personally are designed to inspire us to do his bidding in more ways than we can ask or imagine.

Moses comes back down the mountain, out of the clouds if you will, to his followers with 10 rules, physically set in stone, for the people to live by. How powerful that command must have been as we still do our best to recite and live out those 10 rules for living in our own day.

Peter, James and John may not have returned with their encounter with God written in stone. Instead, they are just as rock solid in their confirmed knowledge, as Peter had expressed a few days earlier, that Jesus was indeed the Christ, the son of the living God.

So, the question is where does this leave us? I have to believe my big mountain summiting days are over. The people who walked with Moses across the wastes of flat Arabian desert before arriving at the base of Sinai didn't follow him up the mountain. Many in this room, although surrounded by these White Mountains, have never had the inclination, ability or desire to trek up their slopes. Flatland people can be found all across this and every land. One of life's best kept secrets is you don't have to climb a mountain in order to have that divine being, on top of the world, encounter with God.

God surrounds us each and every day, whether we care to believe or not, in countless ways making him or herself known. It's that one and the same spirit that overwhelms us with just the right sunrise or sunset. It's the hug of someone special in your life, words on paper that tug at your heartstrings, the trust and warmth while holding the family pet, music that sends our spirit soaring, there's sometimes even a presence within the silence of our own beds. A touch, a word, a smile it's all there.

Yet, there are many among us who refuse to see God's goodness, inside their world they don't seem to care. Take the opening two stanzas of this morning's psalm:

Why are the nations in an uproar, why do the peoples utter empty threats?

Why do the kings of the earth rise up in revolt. And the princes plot together?

What's wrong when the faithful of Russia and Ukraine kill and destroy each other over the greed and mindset of Putin? A man whose conquering ambitions are backed by the Russian Orthodox leader and who then has the nerve to enter and pretend to worship in a church at

Christmas. In so many corners of the world the nations threaten each other, presidents and leaders rise up and plot against their neighbors at the expense of the common people. Earthquake victims are denied quick aid and relief because governments distrust each other. We too in our corner of the planet are not immune when politicians and corporations put themselves and profits first over our citizens.

I believe that's why you and I have those mini-mountain top experiences, so that we can change the world we live in for the better, one or more people at a time.

We know the stories of Moses, Peter, the Disciples and Jesus. As earthly leaders their encounters with God have made changes for the good in a countless number of people throughout the ages.

This comes in contrast to our recognized spirit-filled highs, when shared, which just might become a catalyst for only one or two people in which to grow. Still the few changed by us may exponentially, like a stone thrown into a pond, as the ripple expands it becomes so much larger than the size of the rock.

Think for a bit about the times Jesus has come near. Sometimes the encounter is right there in your face and at other moments the presence is only detected looking back on the event.

I clearly recall two such moments. The first occurred at a retreat weekend with about 60 men sitting on the floor in silence around an altar listening to a read meditation. I was on the outside with no one seated anywhere near me and yet, without a doubt, someone was breathing next to my left ear. I left the event profoundly changed.

The second was more public as Bishop Walmsley of CT pressed his hands down upon my head at my ordination. The electric charge still tingles to this very day.

Both were moments that far surpassed any high mountain feeling or presence of a closeness to the living God. Those are the kind of moments, if we are attentive and respond to in the positive, that God empowers us to do more than we can ever ask or imagine.

Today, as in the past, God uses common folk like us to bring about his kingdom and defeat the injustices brought on by the leaders of the nations. Moses was a slave, Peter a simple fisherman, even Jesus started out as a carpenter, so why not you or me?

As Lent fast approaches I'd suggest it might be fitting to reflect on your life in search of those times you felt the presence of God. How or what was your reaction, did it make a difference and if not why not?

Moses we're told spent 40 days on the mountain so how about using the upcoming 40 days to seek God out in your life. There just might be a mountaintop waiting for you. AMEN