

## COMING OFF THE MOUNTAIN

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On this last Sunday in Epiphany we jump ahead to the mid point of the gospel of Mark. The story of the Transfiguration is placed exactly in the middle of this gospel. It follows Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah and first misunderstanding with the get behind me Satan rebuke from Jesus at the end of chapter 8. We are at a highpoint of the gospel. Following this Jesus comes off the mountain and sets his sights on Jerusalem and ultimately the crucifixion. For we know that without that, there is no resurrection, the resurrection that he has now foretold for a second time.

There are many places where the veil is thin between our world and what lies beyond. Moments when we get a glimpse of this are rare and in the Bible in particular they seem to often happen in the wilderness and especially on mountains. For many people and especially for people of the Bible, mountains were their thin places as with today's passage. Moses has several of these experiences and Jesus often went into the wilderness or up on a mountain to pray. We revel in them and like the disciples want to stay there. We would be happy to build our hut and just enjoy the moment for a long time, but the problem with experiences in thin places is that they do not last even if we physically do not leave the place.

Peter, James and John are not allowed to stay up there in the glorious presence of God. As soon as Peter makes plans to build a hut, God intervenes and the vision disappears in a cloud. That of course is always the problem with mountain top experiences. These experiences, by their nature and God's desire for us, are fleeting moments. We are given a glimpse and then expected to move on.

Several of the great mystics had just such an experience and spent the rest of their lives trying to get back to the mountain. Thomas Merton a Roman Catholic monk of the last century had intended to go to a monastery and spend the rest of his life as a solitary monk, but God had other things in mind for him. He found himself called after a period of time back into the world to spread the gospel and to share what he had experienced about the unity of all people. He was called to write and teach so that others might have the chance to share in that mountain top experience. His biography is entitled *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

These revelations you see are not just meant for us, but for the world. There are appropriate times to go to the mountain or wherever your thin place is. One of my places is at the Emery retreat house in Northern Massachusetts run by the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I try to plan a 5 day silent retreat where I can live in that monastic life, be still and listen for God. This recharges my spiritual battery for my work as a priest. And once in awhile I get one of those rare insights. Other times it is an opportunity to rest in the arms of God.

Last week at our annual council we heard from Canon Robertson who works in our Presiding Bishop's office. He spoke that we as a church spend too much time looking back longingly at those mountain top experiences. Many are longing for the good old days, that golden era. He made the point that this is always backward looking and when we were in the good old days, we were looking back for other good old days. So the good old days are not something that ever really existed, they are just the old days. Filled with equal parts of joy and sorrow. The world has changed and for better or worse, the church of the past is slipping away. We may not like it or we may rejoice in the new opportunities that are out there, but it is the reality of the world. Rather than mourn the past, Canon Robertson called on us to look to the future.

This past year or so has had the feel of an extended time not on a mountain top, but in the wilderness. We spend much of our time in the wilderness and rarely seem to find an oasis in today's world. This is true not just in the church but society in general.

Today's gospel passages has echoes of Moses on the mountain receiving the ten commandments. Like Jesus and the disciples, Moses and the Israelites had their mountain top experiences, but also extended times in the wilderness. The exodus theme and the story of the Moses has been a focal point, a lens through which the vestry and vision team have been looking at St. Aidan's over the last year. It will be the lens through which we will look over three Sunday nights in Lent as a community of where we have been, where we are and most importantly where we are called to go.

Even one that has great worship, good music and great fellowship needs to look outside of itself. If we stay in this comfortable place basking in our "success" we will soon learn that this is a quick trip down hill as a congregation.

I want to give you two things to ponder in preparation for our work this Lent, both of them suggested by Canon Pederson. The first is that most churches are a church in the community. People in the neighborhood call us the little church in the woods. They do not however for the most part know who we are. Canon Pederson challenged us to consider what it would mean to be a church for the community rather than one in the community. Think about the difference that one word makes. What would it mean for us to be a church for the community. This concepts calls us off the mountain, out of these walls into a different relationship with our community. It has the potential to be transformative, to transfigure us. The view is out, not in.

During the period of Lent it is time to spend some time on the mountain but then it is time for us to come off the mountain and get to work. This visioning process has been long and to many frustrating and confusing, but I know that we are about to take some huge steps forward. For that to happen I will need all of you to be involved for this is not my vision of St. Aidan's, but our vision and most importantly God's vision.

We must turn our eyes outside the four walls of this nave. You inherently know the importance. When this worship space was changed you as a congregation consciously left

the back window with clear glass. Why, because after the dismissal we walk out into the world. If we leave our Christianity sitting in the pews then we are missing the point of the great commission, the dismissal and the prayer after communion.

Our liturgy says important things about what we believe. I made a very careful choice to use the post communion prayer on page 366. Why this one and not the other. It is because of these words. These are the words that take us off the mountain and into the fields and valleys

And now, Father, send us out  
to do the work you have given us to do,  
to love and serve you  
as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.  
To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit,  
be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

I hope and pray that during this Lent we will make great strides in clarifying the nature of the work God has given us to do. That's why these three Sundays in Lent are so important. That's why your participation is so critical.

The other thing that Canon Robertson reminded us of is that we need to pray. We as a congregation need to pray for guidance by the Spirit over this Lent. Please join me in daily prayer this Lent for the Spirit to be present with us in a powerful way. That we may all experience at some time during this Lent some sort of mountain top experience to prepare us and guide us in the work God has given us to do.