

Luke 9:28-37

“Up Close and Personal”

Can you remember a time you sensed the presence of God so personally that you could swear you heard the rustle of angels' wings? I remember such a time. Oddly enough, it happened in the Intensive Care Unit of a hospital. In fact, it happened at the moment of death. And it was beautiful and affirming and I knew that God was in the room and yet not contained there.

I was called on a Saturday morning on the way to the grocery store, dressed in shorts and flip flops in the middle of summer. A resident had become suddenly ill and, until his daughter arrived from Charleston I was needed at the hospital. Soon after I arrived, the nurse explained all of the procedures, including surgery, that were to take place in the next few hours on this 91 year-old-man who, up until that week, and been both mentally and physically “fit as a fiddle”. And as soon as she left, this dear man, who I will call Jack Smith, said, “I don't want any of that. I've had a good life and I am ready to go home. Will you help me tell my family?”

Jack's son had died after completing suicide three years earlier and his wife had died about 18 months before. His daughter and sister arrived soon, and I listened and held their hands while he explained his wishes and he asked if they were okay with his decision. They said tearfully that they would support him. When the nurse came however, she was not so understanding. She said, firmly but gently, “Mr. Smith, you understand if we do what you are asking, you will die?” When he replied that he did, she went to get the doctor.

I stepped out of the room to give the family some privacy and returned when the doctors and nurses did. Ultimately, preparations were made to remove the IV's that had been started and

turn off all the machines, including a medication that was literally keeping Jack alive. I asked the nurse quietly how long he would live after the medicine was stopped and she told me a couple of hours.

After a flurry of activity but before the nurse turned off the IV, we all decided to pray together. Jack's daughter and sister and I all told him we loved him, and then we prayed. As soon as I said "Amen", the nurse turned off the medication and we all sat down for what we thought would be a wait. But Jack immediately turned on his side and faced the wall. And when he did, he broke into the biggest smile I had ever seen, took a breath and died.

Jack's daughter asked me right then, "What do you think daddy saw?" Of course, I knew. I told her, "He saw your mother – she came to get him." And the presence of God wrapped all of us in His arms and we experienced both great sorrow and unspeakable joy, all at once. It was a mountaintop experience that I hoped would last for a lifetime. But it did not. Within the hour, I was at the bottom of the mountain, in the Presbyterian Community where I served as Chaplain. It was my job to announce to the other residents and staff that Jack had died. Soon I was dealing with their collective grief and pushing my own joy and sorrow aside so I could answer my call to be their pastor.

Yet that holiness returned when I began reading Luke's story of the Transfiguration. As many times as I have read it, this time I thought, "No wonder Peter wanted to make 'dwelling places' on the mountain top. Wouldn't life be wonderful if that undeniably strong spirit of God was as available to us all the time?" But life doesn't seem to work that way, does it friends? Yet, this morning Luke's account of the transformation that happened on the mountain may offer us the holiness that we are looking for.

Luke places his story of the Transfiguration immediately after Peter's recognition that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus' reaction is to tell them all that he will soon be killed but will also be resurrected. Those of us who know the end of the story may not be so concerned but imagine the fear, the questions, the complete confusion of the disciples. So, I believe it is no coincidence that Jesus chose *this time* to take Peter, James and John to a mountaintop. But *only* Luke tells us that they went to the mountain to pray. And that may be our first clue into finding ways to feel the sacred.

What a gift that Luke includes that Peter, James and John were weighed down with sleep? How many of us have started out with our evening prayer ritual, thanking God for the blessings of the day and asking God to watch over those we love when all of the sudden, we hear ourselves snoring? Or the alarm goes off?

Now undoubtedly these nighttime prayers are sacred and important, but Luke says they went to the mountain FOR THE PURPOSE of praying. Certainly, they did not expect to encounter Moses and Elijah any more than we can plan a perfect sunset. Maybe God wants to remind us that when we are more intentional about our prayers, rather than relying only on the rote prayers that accompany our daily activities, we have more of a chance of experiencing the Holy.

And notice what happens after they are able to ward off sleep long enough to pray. A voice from Heaven answers their prayers. And God Himself affirms that Jesus is indeed his Son. The Transfiguration of the Lord is Heaven's confirmation that Jesus is THE revelation of God's unique Self. But God adds the instructions, "Listen to him!" This is another important reminder for us about experiencing the sacred. Prayer is not just telling God what you need, what you fear, or what you are thankful for. Prayer is listening in the silence to what God has to say to us!

Perhaps this text is challenging each of us, before we enter the Lenten season, to create space for mountaintop experiences with our God. Then when we, like Jesus, turn our faces to Jerusalem to walk through the sorrow and the suffering of Lent and Holy Week, we will have experienced a transfiguration that will make the sadness of Lent more meaningful.

The second thing that may help us discover the presence of God more readily is found when Luke reveals the contents of the conversation that Jesus has with Elijah and Moses. He is the only Gospel writer to do this. On the mountain, Jesus encounters Moses, the most important Old Testament figure and Elijah, the prophet that God promised will come to us before the Messiah appears. We read that as Jesus radiates with dazzling white, the three start discussing his departure. But in the Greek, what Luke says is, “They were speaking about his EXODUS.”

Now, what do we know of the Exodus? We know that it was liberating. That is was the way God freed the chosen people from slavery in Egypt. And certainly we experience freedom when we know we have encountered the living God. But the Exodus was also a very long, arduous journey, filled with discouraging times and lack of faith on the part of the Israelites. And time when God felt both gracious love and disappointment.

Yet, we also know that God stayed the course. That even when the children of Israel did not understand what was happening or questioned where God was, God remained steadfast, faithful and loving. This would serve as a reminder to Peter, James and John in the days to follow that God walks with each of us in times of sorrow. Because soon they would follow Jesus into Jerusalem and on his salvific mission that led to the cross – the place where the fulness of God’s love is ultimately revealed.

And it also serves as a reminder to each of us that God’s presence is not only available to us in prayer. That God will be present in healing and suffering, birth and dying. That we will

see God in the fellow disciples that encourage us and know that God stands with us when the demonic forces of the world challenge us. Indeed, God meets us on the mountain but goes back into the valley when we have to leave our sacred moment behind during our own times of Exodus.

But the thing that stood out to me then most is the reaction of the close friends of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus *instructs* the disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen. However, Luke tells us that they kept silence, implying that they made the decision on their own. And this may be the most important concept for us to consider as we begin our Lenten journey this year.

Maybe this inner circle of Jesus' friends understood that it is necessary for each of us to experience Transfiguration in our own way before it will really have meaning. We cannot just feel God through other people's encounters. We have to find the sacred for ourselves. We all have to go to the mountain AND walk the valley in order to understand true holiness. We can share with one another and help people along the journey. But maybe today is a reminder that we have to encounter God up close and personal before we are truly disciples.

Let me share the story of another Transfiguration, this one a more recent encounter that I have been blessed to witness. Some of you may remember praying for our friend Sandy, who died last summer. She and her husband Roger became our best friends when we moved across the street from them almost 28 years ago. We shared many joys and struggles and family milestones together.

When we first met them, while Sandy was active in a church, Roger made it clear that he did not really need a relationship with God. I think he believed in God, he just didn't want to spend much time with him. When Sandy was first diagnosed with breast cancer, she had a

double mastectomy, chemotherapy, and life moved on. For 11 YEARS Sandy was cancer free. She went to graduate school, became a therapist, saw her two sons marry, her daughter finish nursing school and the birth of two grandchildren. But then the cancer returned. Stage four breast cancer in her lungs, kidneys and bones. Treatment eradicated the cancer everywhere but her bones and Sandy lived life to the fullest and bravely fought for 16 years.

Over the many different treatments, trials, surgeries and countless time of losing her hair and having it grow back, we watched Sandy's faith carry her through but also Roger's Transfiguration. It began in small ways. All of the sudden, Roger would ask us to say grace at meals, something he had never done before. When Sandy decided to change churches and join one closer to home, Roger *asked* to join with her. He even attended 6 weeks of new member classes. He didn't go often, but he was taking baby steps.

And as Sandy's disease spread, so did Roger's faith. He would send out long emails to a group of friends, asking for prayer, even acknowledging the work of prayer in *their* lives – not just in Sandy's. At the time of her death, as I sat with the family to plan her service, the first thing he asked me to do was pray with them.

This Christmas was the first one without Sandy. I miss her so much – I cannot imagine how hard this was on her family. Roger went up to Durham and went to church on Christmas Eve with the grandchildren as they have done for many years. And when he got home, he couldn't wait to get together with us. We met him for dinner a few nights after Christmas he was like a child, filled with excitement. Roger is basically a quiet man of few words but that night, he was bursting at the seams to share his story.

As the extended family gathered for the first time, there were lots of tears, as we can all understand. Then they went to church. And while the children's choir was singing, Roger

became overwhelmed with a feeling of peace. He leaned forward in the pew and put his head in his hands and started to cry. And he said he felt a hand on his shoulder. Assuming it was his son, he looked up to assure him that he would be okay, but his son did NOT have a hand on his shoulder. No one did.

And he said, “Julie, I KNOW that Sandy was there with us. I know she didn’t want to miss Christmas and she put her hand on me to tell me that she there and we were going to be alright.” The fact that Roger had this experience but even more, the fact that he would share it with us, is truly a miracle from God. Many people, including Sandy, Danny and I, have lived our faith and shared it with Roger. But now, Roger has experienced his own Transfiguration. He has walked through the valley and made it to the mountaintop where he met God, up close and personal. He has learned without a doubt that God is always with him and his life will never be the same.

Jesus told Peter not to build a dwelling place for Moses and Elijah because God cannot be contained on a mountain. But each of us must find God in our own way, on our own path. Has your Exodus begun? Are you on the journey to Transfiguration? Are you in the place to help someone else find their way to the mountain top? It is my prayer that we all are on the path to experiencing God’s holiness. And if you are not, may you take your first steps today. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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