Sunday, February 13, 1972
THE PROBLEM OF PEAK EXPERIENCES
Mark 9:2-8,14-29

These two stories from the Gospel of Mark, which are really one story, tell of a "peak experience" and a failure. Both experiences are common to us in our day. Let's look at them separately and then together.

The peak experience of the transfiguration is not the only incident in the Bible where a person or persons had a unique, an overwhelming mysterious encounter with the "holy," with God.

Recall what happened to Moses with the burning bush at the time God called him to lead his people out of Egypt; and again, his unusual experience on Mt. Sinai, when God gave him the law for his people — the ten commandments.

The prophet Elijah in the Old Testament had an unexpected encounter with God, as he was trying to hide from his responsibilities. First there was the wind, then the earthquake, then the fire, followed by the overwhelming sense of God communicating with him and of being in God's presence.

The prophet Isaiah tells us of his almost ecstatic sensation with God in a worship service in the temple. "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up and his train filled the temple, and the foundations of the threshold shook at the sound of the voice of him who called."

Or think of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus; he was on his way to persecute Christians; had an experience with the Risen Christ, and it changed his whole way of life.

It's a similar kind of experience we have just read about in the Gospel of Mark. Three disciples are taken up on the mountain by Jesus and they have a worship sensation which is unforgettable and almost indescribable. All the writer can say is that Jesus was transfigured before them. His garments became glistening, intensely white. His face shone like the sun.

What is the writer trying to tell us? He is certainly saying that the disciples with Jesus had an over-powering worship experience and that in it these three at least perhaps for the first time saw Jesus in a different light.

But what about us? All of us have had some kind of "peak experience," perhaps on a less spectacular scale and we would describe it differently. And maybe our peak experience was not understood in a religious way.

Here are a few examples. We've known someone or at least we've thought we've known someone. We've been with that person, but then one day and sometimes all of a sudden, we see that person in a different light — we see something that we hadn't known was there before. Something new is revealed to us about that person.

In the case of Jesus and the three disciples, this is something like what happened. Or maybe it's similar to another experience that most of us have had. We've been working on a particular problem, looking for a solution, or we've been trying to come to a certain decision. We work and work. and think and think — and then all of a sudden, maybe when we're not thinking

about it, like a flash, it is made plain to us what the solution is or what we should do. We see the whole problem in a new light. It is transfigured.

Peak experiences come in strange places and strange ways. A member of this church in a recent letter described one of his peak experiences.

“One day while driving down the main street of our city on my way to the office, my eyes chanced to encounter the taillight assembly of a then new model automobile. For some mysterious reason, struck by its symmetry of design and refinement of construction, I was suddenly seized by an aura of wonder111ent at the majesty of humanity from whose hands and intellect such a superb piece of design could emanate. I have stood in awe before sculpture by Michelangelo and of Rodin, canvasses of Rembrandt and Wyeth, have listened to the strains of Schubert and Beethoven played by numerous symphonies and have watched with breathless admiration Nureyev and Fonteyn’s rendition of Tchaikovsky’s Hwan Lake ballet. But none of them evoked the sense of sublime revelation as did that transient moment at the stop light.”

The letter writer also described a similar experience L, which occurred to him a number of years before that. 3. \ Sometimes a kind of peak experience can occur in a chance meeting with another person. We may meet someone we’ve never met before and are strangely drawn and attracted to him or her. We’ve never felt that way before and don’t know quite how to handle it, except we’d like to prolong it, or re-create it.

Peak experiences can happen to us in the middle of a large group. Some years ago, while attending a conference in Chicago, a few of us chanced to attend a memorial service being held for Medgar Evers who had been shot in Mississippi. There were about 1500 people crowded into a rather small church and just the few of us were white. After a lot of singing and praying by the congregation and following a sermon, the congregation began to sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic. Tears flowed freely from my eyes as we sang, and I was gripped by an over ı whelming sense of God’s presence in that church and among these people and myself. I have never gotten over that experience.

A peak experience can occur anywhere: in a group, alone, with a few people, while driving a car, while listening to music, in a concert hall or in your home. It can happen while you are quietly meditating, taking a walk, or gazing at a ⌋tower, or while at work.

The one thing common to all peak experiences is that we see or become aware of something inside of us and out ı side of us that we hadn’t quite seen that way or known about before. There is a transfiguration for a brief moment. We see a side of God, or of Christ, or of the universe, or of a person or a problem or an answer that we had not experienced before.

Also, we can never really re-create a peak experience, however the memory of one is something to which we can and do return again and again. It can give us strength to carry on during those dry spells of our lives when nothing seems to work or turn us on. Even though they are rare, we need those uncommon times of being completely grasped by God. But they cannot be contrived or conjured up. We need to wait expectantly for them, and they will often surprise us.

However, the story of the transfiguration in the Bible continues and so it also does for us.

Note what happened next! Peter said to Jesus — "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah?

Peter wanted to capture the event, the moment, the vision, the peak experience. He wanted time to stand still! He wanted to keep Jesus and Moses and Elijah just as they were in that vision. Peter wanted to stay on the mountain, prolong the ecstasy!

Isn't it the same with us? When those rare moments come to us, when we've had some kind of peak experience, when we've beheld awe and mystery, have been grasped by God, we too, want to find some way to capture the event, to perpetuate it, to prolong it. We, too, wish we could have time stand still. If only all of life could be like this! If only we cou1d re1ive the experience, savor it again.

If only we could put God in a booth, capture Him, then maybe we wouldn't have to wait for him again. It's not easy to endure this not having God, this waiting for God.

Furthermore, it would be nice to stay in one spot with God. And some of us attempt it. We have God all tied up in neat packages and doctrines. We can make of our visions and experiences a kind of shrine and try to stay put.

Like Peter we want to forget the fever, the fret and the sweat and the toil down in the valley where we have to deal with people, their problems, their pain, their petti ı ness, where men and women cry out and sin and moan and argue. It's much nicer to have God in a booth, or in a church sanctuary, to have Him in our liturgies, in our doctrines and systems.

Isn't this the way we feel at times? We reach a peak, arrive at a point. We think we've got it made. If only we could stay right there and not move on. Why break our spirits on the stony recalcitrance of Galilee, when there is this encompassing glory, this mystic communion so richly to enjoy. Let's stay on the mountain, or in the temple and let the people come to us if they want to know God. 5.

It is to this mood, which is always our temptation, that the master's words ring out! "Come back to earth! God is not just a God of boothes and boxes and mountaintop experiences.

Life is both mountains and valleys, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health, high points and low points. We cannot stop the flow of time, nor can we go backward and re-capture the original experience. Rather we move on, and new experiences come. Visions come and visions fade.

Peak experiences are not just for the sake of the peak experiences themselves. Life moves on! God moves on! What God has joined together, put not asunder. And if Peter, James, and John hesitate, on Christ goes without them, striding down the hill to where the need of man is greatest; for he cannot stay out of it.

And they came down the mountain to the rest of the disciples and they saw a great crowd about them and the scribes arguing with them. What a sharp contrast between the top of the mountain and the pain-filled valley! It is not accidental that one follows the other in all three gospel accounts.

Raphael has a painting of the scene. In it, he shows the contrast between the top of the mountain, the peak experience, and the valley below. Above we see the beauty of that high

vision, the cloud of glory — below, we see the tragic needs and the suffering of the valley; we see a boy who needs to be healed. Instead of the solitude of the mountain, we have a great crowd milling about, arguing and angry. Instead of Christ and Elijah and Moses and glory, we have a distraught, disillusioned father and his sick child.

Instead of a reassuring voice from heaven, we have a com ı plaint about the weakness and failure of the disciples. They had been unable to heal the boy brought to them and now the scribes were arguing= with them and making fun of them. Jesus and three of his disciples had been communing with God, but now they must deal with a demon. All of this is to be seen in the same picture. One goes with the other. It's a picture of our life. It's part of the problem of peak experiences. In modern space language we would say it's the problem of re-entry!

As soon as Jesus and the three reached the valley, a man came to him and told him that the disciples he had left below had failed. The man said to Jesus, "I asked your disciples to cast out the demon and they were not able."

The key words — "they were not able. "How often we have felt that accusing word pointing at us — you were not able. It is this mistake mirrored in this story, the opposite kind of blunder into which we are just as apt to fall, the mistake of the remaining disciples in the valley.

What they were trying to do in their master's absence, was to perform by their own strength a miracle of healing on a poor delirious demon-possessed creature in whom the anguish of the world seems typified. Jesus had vanished. He was up in the clouds. There was no saying when he might return.

But so what, thought the nine disciples. Were they not practical men, with .11, initiative, ingenuity? Had they not learned the right techniques? Wait upon the Lord? Why should we? The world is waiting for us. We have the answers. There are things to be done. We can cast out the demons of the world successfully. Are not realism and rational planning and action better for the problems of this world than idealism and all this talk about God and his power? A baby in a manger and a man on a cross seem to be kind of irrelevant in a world that demands action.

But still the tragedy in the valley drags on as it did for the disciples. The distraught father with the demented son remains distraught. Just when we seem to be attacking the demons on some other ground, we find them at work in our own home ground.

But Jesus said, "Bring the boy to me"! And he healed the boy and gave him back to his father. Jesus continues to say — "bring the boy to me!" Later, his embarrassed disciples asked JESUS privately, "Why could we not cast out the demon? Why were we not able?" And Jesus said, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer. "

Only with God's power working in and through us can we meet the problems of the world. Jesus' answer is a caution against dogmatism, church arrogance and simplistic solutions.

All of our own answers and actions are compounded of good and evil and sometimes the balance is so close that only God can see the difference.

To remain on the mountain or to stay in the valley? That's the problem of peak experiences. Either by itself is a one-sided answer. The quietist, or the activist, the man who revels in

tradition or the person who wants to be where the action is — what God has joined together, we often Rant to put asunder.

Our ministry, our everyday living is both mountain and valley, mystic vision and missionary passion, tradition and crisis. It is being with Jesus at the Lord's table and in peak experiences and also following him into the world. Amen.