Sunday, February 10, 2002
MOUNTAIN TOPS OR LEVEL PRAIRIES?
Matthew 17:1-9

Today's Bible story begins with this statement: "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter, James, and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white."

The transfiguration story is dramatically staged on a mountain peak covered with a bright, even blinding light. It is reminiscent of many stories in the Old Testament where individuals have unusual spiritual experiences on a mountain. There's the story in Exodus where God said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction."

Elijah the prophet had his own unique mountain-top experience where he came to know the overwhelming presence of God in a "still small voice." So it is no surprise that in their own mountain-top experience with Jesus, Peter, James, and John see a vision that includes Moses and Elijah, who are both mountain-top spiritual ancestors.

It was natural for people who lived in a land of mountain peaks and corresponding valleys to think of them as holy places. Mountain tops became memory sites. Many of the sacred stories of their people were enshrined in the mountain tops where they believed the high heaven and the flat earth intersected. At such intersections, the holy presence of God seemed closer. Today, some still speak of "mountain-top" experiences.

But what about people who live in the flatlands, the prairies, or the plains, where no mountains or even high hills are available and thus there are no valleys? Where do such individuals experience the Holy Presence of the Sacred? Having lived in Nebraska for the past 30 years, I've come to love the prairies and the plains, and you and I know that God's Spirit is as much here as anywhere else.

When I visit with some of my ministerial colleagues who live near or in the mountains, I remind them that, according to the prophet Isaiah, we who live on the plains are truly living in God's realm. After all, Isaiah said, "When God is truly present, 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.'"

It's a beautiful metaphor that tells us that when we are truly in God's presence, all barriers that separate us, such as hills and valleys, are removed.

So take heart, my friends. You can come to know and experience the Sacred in the prairies and on the plains as well as in the mountains. In fact, this story tells us that you can come to know the Holy One in some surprising settings. When the three disciples accompanied Jesus that day, they weren't expecting anything unusual.

One woman wrote about her surprising experience of the Sacred. Judi Cook shared this story from our adult church school curriculum material: "It was a wonderful Monday morning — a day off. The house was filled with that silence that comes after a hectic morning of trying to get

the kids off to school. Calming music filled each room of the house. For the time being, there were no schedules, no projects, no demands. I was able to just 'be' in the moment. Even the mundane task of clearing the dishes from the table seemed a source of comfort."

"I stood in front of the sink washing the dishes and allowing the music to fill me and soothe my soul. Then it happened, right in the middle of a song, right there with my hands in the soapy dishwater. A feeling of peace flowed through me. It was as if every cell of my body was filled with God's love. In this special moment, God was embracing me."

"I wanted to hold on to the moment. I wanted it to be perfect. But wait, I thought, this isn't right. I can't allow God to embrace me while I'm doing the dishes. For some unknown reason, God had used a particular song to communicate with me, and I needed to listen better. So I dried my hands, rushed to the den, rewound the tape, and sat in a more proper meditative position of openness in order to better receive God's message. My heart was racing as I concentrated on the words of the song. I sat there prepared and ready to receive whatever God wanted me to hear. I rewound the tape again and waited. Nothing."

"The feeling of peace and love was gone. The moment was lost. The house seemed empty, and I was alone. It felt as if a part of my being had been ripped from me. A hollow feeling filled that vacant spot, leaving me craving what was. All I could do was cry."

"In an effort to make things perfect for God, I threw away God's perfect moment. In my attempts to hold on and be in control, I let go of an embrace from God."

Does that sound familiar? When Peter, James, and John had their transfiguration experience with Jesus, the first thing Peter wanted to do was to hang on to it — to make it even more perfect, to keep it forever. He suggested that they quickly build three shrines to enclose the experience, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. That way, they could freeze the event and hold on to it throughout eternity.

We all have that desire. We would like to stop and freeze the bright and happy moments of our lives. You want to believe that this is the stuff of life — those high, exciting times when everything is working right and there is no pain or struggle. Maybe that's part of the reason for our nation's drug problem. People want to stay in the high zone all the time, so they have to buoy themselves against sorrow, frustration, and pain.

A book I've been reading this past week has the title As I Lay Dying. As the author gets closer to death, he keeps a journal, and he becomes more acutely aware of the fact that without death, there is no life; without agony, there is no ecstasy. The intensity of life is increased by the awareness of its awful brevity. He quotes a biologist giving this definition of life: "A living organism can be defined quite simply. It is something that can die. Where there is not death, there is not life." Without the valley, there is no mountain.

Holy and sacred events come and go. They come unexpectedly and leave at their own will. They cannot be captured or made more perfect, only remembered and then used for inspiration to deal with the pain in life. Jesus took the three disciples back down the mountain, back into the middle of life's problems and sufferings. Jesus would not allow his disciples to separate glory from pain.

When they got down the mountain, they were met by the needs of everyday life in the suffering of an epileptic boy. If Peter could've built his shrines, he would never have come down the

mountain into the rest of life where the ministry of Jesus was taking place. God's presence was also there.

You can meet the Sacred on the mountain and in the valley, and on the plains, in ecstasy, and in agony. God comes to you in the peak experiences of life, in ordinary everyday events, and in pain and suffering. If you have been pushed from your marriage or from a deep relationship because your partner claims to no longer love you, you understand the mystery of God's presence in the midst of pain. If you have had to wait for the results of a laboratory test to tell you whether or not the tumor you have is malignant or benign, you know the pain of the valley.

If you have stood at the bedside of someone you love who is dying and you don't know whether to pray for death or for a continued painful life, you know what it is like to seek the peace of God in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death.

In addition to leading the three disciples down the mountain into the pain and suffering of the valley, there are two other directives given in this story that are for your instruction and mine. In the visionary moment, the three disciples are told, "This is my Son, the Beloved... listen to him." Listen! And on the way down the mountain, Jesus instructs the disciples, "Tell no one about this experience until the time is right." The two go together — when to listen and when to speak?

You've known people who have difficulty listening, and when they talk, they tell you too much too soon. Not only do they tell you more than you want to know about their successes, failures, illnesses, and troubles, but they also talk too much about their special religious experiences.

Somewhere in his life's journey, Jesus learned when to listen and when to talk. One day he said to his disciples, "I have many more things to tell you, but you cannot bear them now." There is a time to speak and a time to keep silent.

"Tell no one... until!" He was reminding his disciples and us, "You've had a new experience with the Spirit of God. You cannot immediately understand or comprehend it, so don't tell anyone about it. You've still got some spiritual growing to do."

Although I do not watch any daytime television programs, I'm told that many of them feature people who want to talk too much about their bizarre problems in public. The same is true of some radio talk shows. I sometimes hear bits and pieces as I'm driving in my car from one place to another.

One day I heard a man tell the talk show host, with difficulty and reluctance, some deep dark secret he had never told anyone before. Then another caller came on the line, and she said that she never had trouble telling other people her experiences and her secrets. She went on to say that she had called in not to talk about that but to try to discover why she didn't have any friends.

The host of the radio program asked her if she tended to be very open about all of her problems from the moment she met people who might become her friends. "Oh yes," she said. "Last week, for example, I invited my new neighbor to dinner. She was shy, so I began talking right away. I told her about my adoption, my son's problems, and my most recent extra-marital love affair. She listened, but she wouldn't tell me anything about herself. I saw her a few days later, and she didn't act very friendly. I asked her to come for tea, but she never showed up. What am I doing wrong?"

The talk show host said, “You need to learn when to listen and when to talk, and when you talk, you need to learn what to tell others and what not to tell.”

Some people tell others too much too soon. They’re always talking about when they were saved, how it changed their life forever, and what they are going to do. Somehow it seems as if all their energy gets used up in talking about their spiritual experiences, and nothing else much happens.

There are times when we need to let the energy of the vision work within us before we talk about it. Let it incubate. The deep experiences in life, spiritual and every other kind, need to mature within us before we talk about them with others.

Jesus’s counsel to keep quiet for a time takes the pressure off when you experience the incomprehensible and inconceivable in life. Death, tragedy, disloyalty, surprising experiences of ecstasy and happiness — all are equally beyond our finite understanding instantly. Mystery is best attended by a fitting reticence. Many times it is only in looking back that we begin to understand what happened to us on a particular journey.

The faithful mystics throughout history who have experienced some of the deep mysteries of the Divine speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and with difficulty. The most profound spiritual experiences are, for the most part, inexpressible. When they need to be told to someone, they must be talked about carefully, reverently, and with the sense that there is still much lacking in our knowledge of God.

The life journey of a growing Christian is something like that. It is frequently a gradual growing and training, a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. To be born again is only the first step. You need to continue to grow and mature in the faith. An important part of that journey is learning when to listen and when to talk. Amen.