Sunday, February 6, 2005
GET UP AND DO NOT BE AFRAID
Matthew 17:1-9

This church building is a very popular place for wedding ceremonies. Photographers especially like to photograph weddings here because of the beauty of the building and the courtyard with all of its arches. It's also not unusual for family members to bring their cameras and take pictures before, during, and after the ceremony. Last summer, I happened to be standing next to the bride's mother immediately following a beautiful wedding. She proudly showed me a series of pictures she had taken during the ceremony with her Polaroid camera. The ceremony was barely over, and she had already started memorializing it. She seemed to be more enamored with her photos than with the event itself. I could understand her desire. We all have this human tendency to want to stop time in the high points of life.

That's what happened in the story read today from Matthew's gospel. Jesus invited Peter, James, and John to accompany him on a spiritual retreat. Why the other nine disciples did not go with them is not known. Maybe they were invited and declined. The story is dramatically staged on a mountaintop. It is reminiscent of other stories in the Old Testament where individuals have unusual spiritual adventures on a mountain.

Moses was told, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, and I will give you the commandments." Elijah the prophet had his own unique mountaintop experience where he came to know the overwhelming presence and comfort of God in a "still small voice" of assurance.

So it is no surprise that in their own mountaintop experience with Jesus — Peter, James, and John have a vision that includes Moses and Elijah, who are both mountaintop spiritual ancestors. Furthermore, it was natural for people who lived in a land of mountains and valleys to think of the high places as holy places. Mountaintops became memory sites. Many of the sacred stories of the Bible take place on peaks where people believed the high heaven and the flat earth intersected. At such high places, God seemed closer. It's a common metaphor even today. People still speak of "mountaintop" spiritual experiences no matter where they take place. In the language of prayers, people pray to "the Most High God."

But what about people who live on the prairies and plains, where no mountains or even hills are available? I've not heard anyone describe a unique spiritual point in life as a "plains experience." Since coming to live in Nebraska over 30 years ago, I've come to love the prairies and the plains. I know that God's loving presence is as much here as in the mountains. According to the prophet Isaiah, we who live on the plains are truly living in God's place. 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, which tells you that when you are truly in God's presence, all barriers that separate people, 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 of Nebraska as well as anywhere else, and at any time.

Here's one woman's story: "It was a wonderful Monday — a day off. The house was filled with that silence that comes after a hectic morning of trying to get the children off to school.

Calming music filled each room of the house. For the time being, there were no schedules, no projects, no demands. 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 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 overwhelming peace. My body was filled with God's love. In that special moment, God was embracing me."

"I wanted to hold onto 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..."

Does that sound familiar? When Peter, James, and John had their spiritual high with Jesus, the first thing Peter wanted to do was to hang on to it — to keep it forever. He suggested they quickly build three shrines to capture the moment, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. That way they could freeze the event and hold onto it forever.

You can understand that desire. You want to stop and hold on to the unique events and happy times of your life. That's why you take photographs and make videotapes of them. You don't usually take photographs of sad events. You want to remember the joyful ones and relive those moments. But you can't stop time. You can't hold onto everything and experience it completely. Holy and sacred times come and go. They cannot be captured and made perfect.

In the same way, you want to hold on to some of your beliefs, especially those that have brought you comfort. It was a safe place for Peter, James, and John with Jesus on the mountain. They had him all to themselves. Why not stay there and avoid the pain, confusion, and doubt in the valleys of life? Before they had gone up the mountain, Jesus had told his disciples to deny themselves and take up their cross.

You can't keep Jesus as you want him to be. Some of you have precious memories of what Jesus meant to you as a child. You can't keep him that way. That's the first point this story makes. You have to continue to grow and experience the person of Jesus and the presence of God in different ways. You cannot keep Jesus or God in a box all to yourself or in a belief that you refuse to reconsider. Many religious doctrines are like those booths that Peter wanted to build.

Note what happened next in this Bible story. Peter, James, and John heard a voice that said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome with fear. So Jesus touched them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid." What were they afraid of? They were filled with fear because the most difficult thing in the world is to listen and to see. You don't want to hear new ideas that contradict what you have always believed. Do you think a capitalist wants to see or hear what is good in the communist system? Do you think a communist wants to see or hear what is good and healthy in the capitalist system? Do you think a rich person wants to look at a poor person? You don't want to look or to listen because if you do, you might change. They saw something about Jesus they hadn't seen before, and that scared them. That's what happens when your old

beliefs are called into question. They were also afraid because the vision disappeared. They were afraid to leave the mountain. They wanted to stop the world where it was.

“Get up and do not be afraid.” You can’t stay on the mountain forever. Every honeymoon comes to an end. Life is filled with movement and change, joy and sorrow, sickness and health. There’s always more to learn about this Jesus and the God of love he revealed.

In addition, there’s work to be done. Jesus led them down the mountain into the valley, right into the middle of life’s problems and pains. There, they were met by the needs of everyday life in the suffering of an epileptic boy. Jesus wanted them to understand that faith is not just about spiritual highs; it is also about helping others and facing the realities of the world.

You can meet the Sacred and experience the Holy on the mountain, in the valley, and on the plains, in ecstasy and in agony. God comes to you in the peak experiences of life and also in the ordinary and everyday events of pain and suffering.

In addition to leading the three disciples down the mountain into the pain and suffering of the valley, there’s one more lesson to be learned. Jesus instructed Peter, James, and John to tell no one about the vision they had experienced until the time was right. When you experience the mystery of God’s presence, it may not be wise to talk about it too soon. Think about it. Let it work inside you.

Why? Because you’ve had a new experience with the Spirit of God. You cannot possibly immediately understand it or comprehend it, so don’t tell anyone about it. Some spiritual maturing is necessary.

Jesus followed his own advice. When he was baptized by John, he felt God’s power and assurance in a way he had not known before. What did he do? He told no one about it. He spent time away to sort it out.

You can talk about or try to explain life-changing occurrences too quickly. More often than not, they need a period of incubation or germination in your consciousness. A revelatory experience is a form of communication that can stop you in your tracks and then lead you to another path, which will take time to discover and then to follow. You do not always understand instantly what has happened.

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

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 call-in programs. 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 reluctance and difficulty, some deep, dark secret he had never told anyone before. Then another caller came on the line, and she said she never had trouble telling other people her experiences and her secrets. She went on to say that she had not called in to talk about that, but to try to discover why she didn’t have any friends.

She explained that 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 extramarital love affair. She seemed to listen, but she wouldn’t tell me anything about herself. I saw her a few days later, and she didn’t seem 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 talk and when to listen, and when you talk, you need to learn what to tell others and what not to tell.”

The same principle applies when dealing with life’s mysteries. Give yourself time to process and understand before you rush to explain. It takes the pressure off when you experience the incomprehensible and inconceivable in life. Ecstasy, visions, tragedy, death, betrayal, and other surprising experiences need time for understanding. Mystery is best attended by a fitting reticence. Many times it is only in looking back after time has passed that you can begin to understand what happened to you.

The faithful mystics throughout history who have experienced some of the deep mysteries of the Divine speak of them prudently, reservedly, cautiously, and reluctantly. 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 and reverently and with the sense that there is still much lacking in your knowledge of God.

The life journey of a growing Christian is frequently a gradual growing and training, a wading deeper and deeper into the truth. To be born again is only one step. You need to continue to grow and mature in the faith. An important part of that growing is learning that you cannot capture and put in a box such an experience, like Peter wanted to do. Second, you will be afraid because now you have to question your assumptions, but Jesus assures you, “Get up and do not be afraid.” Third, you need to know when to listen and when to talk. Amen.