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Transfiguration Sunday, February 6, 2005  
Matthew 17:1-9

“Mountains Beyond Mountains”

*When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.”*

In the summer of 2000 I went on a one-month study seminar to the Middle East with seminarians from across the country. The hope was to bring future leaders of the church, from across the theological spectrum, together with lay-people to journey to the Holy Land, and study the history and sacred places of our faith.

A couple of the weeks into the trip we made our way into the Sinai peninsula and to the base of Mt. Sinai, the place we read about in Exodus this morning, the mountain Moses climbed to receive the ten commandments. Our team slept for a few hours in a local motel and woke up at 2:00am to take a sleepy bus ride to the base of the mountain. There we were each assigned a local guide and a mammal of some kind that was to take us to the summit. Somehow I ended up at the front of the line and locked a careful eye on this creature that I was to ride to the top of the mountain. In the pre-dawn hours it looked like something that had stepped off the set of a Star Wars movie, shaggy and burly, with dark eyes and a large muzzle. I was not at all confident this thing would get me safely to the top. “What is it?” I asked the guide. “A camel,” he said. I had never seen a camel this close before and I had certainly never had to stake my life on one. I peered at his face in the night, the camel blinked back at me, and then said, “you’re never going to make it.” Or at least, that’s what I thought I heard, remembering the steep cliffs and shale covered paths we had hiked in the area the evening before.

Nonetheless, I climbed aboard for the long, dark, rather uncomfortable ride up the side of Sinai, trying to shield my mind from the sheer drop I was sure that was just inches off the path. On the ride up, I remembered that in the ancient world mountains were seen as holy places, the dwellings of the gods, because in the mountains heaven and earth were thought to come together more easily. By the time we reached the top, the soft glow of dawn was beginning to enfold us. And a few minutes after we settled against the heavy slabs of stone that adorned Sinai’s peak, the sun burst into life in the Eastern sky, the mountain dazzled, and it was as if fire danced across the peaks. In the splendor of the moment people caught their breath and faces beamed in the morning light. If there ever was a mountain top experience, this was one. We stayed until our guides hustled us out of the growing morning heat, and down the backside of the mountain, this time on foot, a long four-hour hike down to the base.

We arrived in the valley out of breath but flush with excitement. I wanted to huddle with my teammates and exchange stories of wonder and epiphany. I wanted to know if anyone had encountered the divine. But I couldn’t find them anywhere. Instead, I was engulfed in a sea of humanity. Egyptian women, children clinging to their sides, were holding out their hands for a coin or something to eat. I saw an old man with no legs, sitting by the side of the path, extending a cup and a solemn look in my direction. A

little girl was playing a version of hopscotch over a pattern in the dust. Fire may have danced on the mountaintop, but real human life, in all of its sadness and beauty, was seething in the valley.

The Gospel this morning is the account of another mountaintop experience. It is Matthew's account of the transfiguration, read on the last Sunday before Lent. It marks a significant shift in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has gone up on a mountain and he's taken his senior administration with him. Peter, James, and John, the same three he will ask to stay awake with him in the Garden of Gethsemane before his execution. He has been teaching, feeding, and healing. He has made quite a name for himself and the disciples that are at his side. But on this day, Jesus, Peter, James, and John, steal away by themselves, up on a mountain top, to retreat perhaps, take a break from the frenetic pace of life down below, the crowds, the suffering, the hungry, the poor, the arguments with the local clergy and keepers of the law.

They've climbed up on a mountain to get away from it all. What happens next is completely unexpected, more shimmering mystery than hard-edged theology. Like a scene one might remember from the depths of a sleepy dream, Jesus is transfigured before them, his face shines like the sun and his clothes become dazzling white. Elijah, the great prophet of the Hebrew people, and Moses, the one to whom God gave the law at the top of Mt. Sinai, both appear. For some reason, this doesn't seem odd to Peter, two guys who have been dead for hundreds of years, showing up out of the blue, Jesus looking like something out of the magical mystery tour. Elijah, Moses, Jesus, Peter decides right then that life is better lived in the mountains. He says Lord, "let's stay here," and multi-talented Peter switches from fisherman to tent-maker. He plans to set up camp for a while. Peter is talking out of his mind. He doesn't get it now anymore than he will in the garden six weeks from now.

Before Jesus can respond to Peter's temporary insanity, a cloud appears, similar to the one that appeared a few weeks back at Jesus' baptism, and from that cloud a voice that booms out, "This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him." Immediately, Peter and the other two disciples fall to the ground, heads in the dust overcome by fear.

What comes next I imagine to be one of the most tender moments that scripture relates between Jesus and his disciples. The cloud disappears. Moses and Elijah are gone and Jesus comes off the crest of the mountain, he kneels down in the dirt, he lays a hand on their shoulders, and says, in what must have been a gentle voice, "get up, do not be afraid," and they dust themselves off and go with him down in the valley, where there were sick people to be healed, and disputes among disciples to be settled, and lots more work to be done, and as Jesus promised, suffering, and even death. This is the way that God comes into the world, not solely in the cloud of mystery, not only a voice from heaven, but in the midst of human flesh God comes close, gets down in the dirt with a touch of the hand, and the words, "Do not be afraid." The disciples had to go back down in the valley with nothing more to sustain them than a glimpse, one-shining, God-proof mountaintop moment, one voice, one touch, to give them courage and relieve the fear.

Every year we hear reports about how difficult January and February can be on our fragile psyches. The joy and fellowship of Christmas seem far away, another long year waits. Many well-intentioned New Years resolutions have already been broken; the weather tends to be cold and gray. The world didn't get any better on January 1, 2005,

wars are still raging, the hungry are still hungry, the sick still dying. Counseling offices get clogged up during these last weeks of winter. In my conversations with students over the past several days I have noticed similar trends. I've been especially attuned to seniors. The second semester of senior year can at times feel like the pinnacle of achievement, mount Duke has been mastered, scaled and defeated. Three and a half years of the University are in the rear-view mirror. What seemed like a daunting task when you pulled up to the East Campus dorms in August of 2001, now seems surprising comfortable. But from the mountaintop, the valley can look frightening, and the road ahead shrouded by clouds. I have been polling seniors over the past few weeks, asking them what their dominant feeling is. One said, "I am excited," it's time to be moving on. Another said, "I'm horribly anxious." A third said, "ask me after the Carolina game on Wednesday night." I'm not sure he understood the gravity of the question. And then one senior said, "I'm lonely and so afraid, because here I am comfortable, I have learned how to succeed, but I'm terrified of going out in the real world, because I do not know what will happen next." The world is indeed a frightening place, a place where the unexpected happens, and life can be entirely too fragile. It's like Tolkien said in the Lord of the Rings: "The World is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places. But still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater."

On Friday afternoon we had an interfaith prayer vigil out in front of the Chapel. We pulled together some candles and Sam Hammond played the carillon beautifully. The vigil was to mark forty days after the Tsunami, to honor the dead and pray for the victims, to challenge one another to respond in some meaningful way. A Muslim student from Indonesia led Islamic prayers for the dead, for the living, for peace. He pulled me aside after the vigil to say thank you, though it was I who was thankful to him. He said it was a great honor to lead prayers on what he called sacred ground. He said God was present to him, there in the chilly evening twilight, surrounded by people of different faiths. He had lost 20 members of his family to the waves, and those last forty days had been grief-filled and terrifying.

I'd rather not try to puzzle out the theological complexities of a Muslim being visited by God on the steps of a Christian Chapel, and just leave it as what it was, a mystery, a holy moment, one that I pray sustains him in the deep thick valley of grief and fear he is walking through just now.

Mt. Sinai, the Mount of Beatitudes, the Mount of Transfiguration, these mountains are not the only mountains of course, they do not represent the only times when the curtain of eternity is pulled back and God becomes transfigured in human flesh. Paul Farmer told us that in Haiti there is a proverb: "Beyond mountains, there are mountains," and thus is the case today. Matthew is giving us a glimpse, foresight of another mountain some six or so weeks hence.

For you see, Jesus' transfiguration is the story not of one mountain, but two, both of mystery and awe and transformation. On the first mountain Jesus is covered with white clothes and dazzling light. Three disciples surround him. Moses and Elijah are on his right and left. Six weeks from now there will be another mountain. And there Jesus will be covered, not with dazzling clothes, but with blood and sweat, surrounded not by disciples, but Roman soldiers, not by prophets, but two thieves, one on his right, one on

his left. He will be quite different. God's beloved son will have a broken body, ripped open by the tragedy and the valleys of human life.

Next week is the beginning of Lent, the season of the cross. In three days in this Chapel we'll smear ashes on our faces, as a reminder of our walk with Jesus through the cruciform valley of life. But before we begin that sacred journey, God will pull back the shadowy veil between this life and the next, and give us one more touch, one more sign that the fulfillment of God's love for the world is embodied in Jesus of Nazareth, one more reminder that perfect love casts out fear. It won't be a long moment, few of these sorts ever are, but it will be enough. For you see, just behind me is another mountain, well not really a mountain, but a rise, an altar, where Jesus will once again appear, transfigured in the form of bread and wine. He won't stay up there long, as with the other mountain stories, he'll come down, right down these stairs, into the midst of human life. Amen.