

Sermons at Christ Church

Lord, Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace.

Epiphany VII/Transfiguration
The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Come with me to the mountain top. Jesus invited his friends. The mountain top is a place where we experience the glory of God, can see the human potential and testify to what is possible. In his last speech on the night before his assassination in Memphis, TN., Dr. King talked about having been to the mountain top-the place where he experienced the glory of God and saw the possibilities for the African American community and the American society.

The mountain top, if you've ever been, offers a unique view-it is a place where you come to realize that the world needs more than our secret holiness and good intentions. It is the place where God asks for our hearts and where we willingly offer them. It is the place where the heart beats in rhythm with God because we learn something new about us and God. It is for this reason that the ancient people of Israel considered the mountain top to be holy, a place to commune with God.

Moses first encountered God on the mountain top, when God appeared to him in the form of a burning bush and tasked him with the responsibility of delivering the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. On the same mountain top, God gave Moses the tablets of stone upon which was written the Ten Commandments-a new set of rules designed to create a more harmonious society where the glory of God could be made manifest. The Ten Commandments contains both law and love- it is law in form and love in substance. To be on the mountain top is to know that it is the law which holds our lives and world together; and it is love that moves the world forward. Without love, we can never recognize the essence of the law nor can we ever move forward.

In the gospel story we learn about Jesus taking some of his disciples to the mountain top, where he was transfigured before them. Days before this trip to the mountain top, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" They responded that some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah or

Jeremiah or some of the prophets. “But what about you. Who do you say that I am?” Peter, with great enthusiasm proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

If Peter had any doubts about his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah, the Transfiguration or Transformation of Jesus on the mountain top erased any doubt he may have had because the mountain top experience not only gave life to an already latent belief in Jesus as the Messiah, but it also affirmed for Peter, James and John, the uniqueness of Jesus.

What the disciples saw on the mountain top was so moving, so glorious, so magnificent, so powerful and so life transforming that Peter couldn’t put his thoughts into words. His response was, Lord, it is good we are here-we have seen the glory of God, we can bear witness to what is possible. Let us memorialize this experience by building three booths; one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

Yes, Peter didn’t know what he was talking about. He was simply reacting to an experience that was beyond his understanding but not alien to Jewish reaction to a mountain top experience or an encounter with the divine.

A classic example is the story of Jacob. While he escaped from Esau who sought to kill him for stealing his blessings, he had a dream of a ladder stretching to the heavens with angels ascending and descending on it. In the dream, God renewed the promise to give the land on which he slept to him and his descendants. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he immediately recognized the sacredness of the place and anointed with oil the stone on which he laid his head. He called the place Bethel- which means the House of God.

Many years later, when Jacob was returning to his homeland, he struggled with a man the night before he was set to meet his brother Esau. Although the man couldn’t prevail, he struck and dislocated Jacob’s hip. Jacob held on to him even as the man pleaded to let him go. Jacob asked him to bless him before he lets him go. The man blessed Jacob-and there he changed his name from Jacob to Israel. Jacob called the place Peniel-which means I have seen God face to face, and yet my life was spared.

Come with me to the mountain top.

The mountain top is a place of divine-human encounter. And these encounters do happen. For, unless you haven't felt the presence of God or the hand of God move in your life, you wouldn't believe that God still reveals Himself to us. Unless you haven't been touched by God, you wouldn't believe that God still touches people. Unless you haven't been shown a path to walk, you wouldn't believe that God still points to us the paths of righteousness and peace. Unless you haven't been hungry or sick, you wouldn't believe that God still feeds us and heals us.

If you haven't been lost before, you wouldn't know God's burning desire to seek and find you. Unless you haven't felt broken before, you wouldn't believe that God still mends us. Unless you haven't felt hopeless before you wouldn't believe that God still comforts us. If you haven't been hurt before, you wouldn't know the power of God which consoles us. Unless you haven't felt estranged before, you wouldn't believe that God still reconciles us. Unless you haven't been to the mountain top, you wouldn't see nor would you know what is possible.

On the mountain, Peter suggested that they build three booths. As laudable as Peter's suggestion may have been, it is important to realize that our mountain top experiences are stories of our spiritual renewal and rebirth and those stories are living and compelling stories that shape our faith and our lives. They're stories that reflect the transition we have made from simply carrying the law to actually obeying them. They're stories that reflect our encounters with God, and because we now have a unique insight into our relationship with God we can tell others about God. Dr. King could tell others about his mountain top experience because he had been there and seen what is possible.

Here's a story. Two fishes were swimming when they saw a piece of meat dangling before them. The younger fish darted toward it with an open mouth. The older fish cried out, "Stop" "You can't see it, but there is a hook inside that meat. It is connected by an invisible line to a pole outside the water. There is a man holding the pole" "The truth is, if you eat the meat, the hook will catch in your jaw and the man will pull you out of the water. He will cut you open with a knife, roast you on a fire and eat you. Then he will throw your remains to his cat." The young fish stopped. The two swam away. But when the young fish was alone, he thought to himself, "Let me investigate the *truth* myself how accurate these lousy claims are"

He went back to the meat, swam around it, above and below it. He swam as far as he could in widening circles around the meat. After a long search, he said to himself, "I've looked far and wide, and I haven't found any sign of a man, a pole, a knife, a fire or a cat. In fact, I've found nothing outside this water we live in." I have come to realize my truth. "These must just be stories made up to limit our freedoms."

He went back to the meat and ate it. The hook caught in his jaw, he felt himself being yanked out of the water. For sure He saw a pole, a man and a knife, and a little further, he saw the man's cat sleeping in a shade, but at that point his knowledge of the truth was useless.

His truth couldn't help him. If only he had listened to the older fish-that fish who had been to the mountain top, and so could bear testimony. What is your testimony about your experience at the mountain top? What testimony do you have about your transformation and renewal?

God require us to tell the stories of our mountain top experience to Daniela and Nkennanyelum-just so they can also desire for that same experience that changes all our lives, that gives meaning to all of our lives, sustains all of our lives and assures us of what is possible.

At different stages of our relationship with God, we behold the glory of a God who dares to reveal Himself to us in ways that surprises, confounds and energizes us. It surprises because it is always beyond our expectation that God would reveal God's self to us; confounding because we tend to ask that question, who am I to be invited to be a part of God's story? Who am I to behold the glory of God? And it energizes us because if we thought God didn't care about us, God proves to us time and again that indeed He cares about us.

The mountain top is a place of glory, transformation and renewal, to be at the top is to feel liberated and free to tell the stories of God because you have been seen and touched by God in a way you never thought possible. Amen.