

### “Mountaintop Experiences”

“His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light.” Moses and Elijah were talking to him. There was a bright cloud overshadowing him and out of it ... a voice saying: *This is my beloved son with whom I am well please ... listen to him.* The three disciples who witnessed the scene *fell on their faces, and were filled with awe.*

This is as strange a scene as there is in the Gospels. Even without the voice from the cloud to explain it, the disciples had no doubt what they were witnessing. It was Jesus of Nazareth all right, the man whom they had walked many dusty miles with ... whose mother and brothers they knew ... and the one they had seen as hungry, tired, and footsore as the rest of them. However, it was also the Messiah ... the Christ ... in all his glory! It was the holiness of the man shining through his humanness ... his face so afire with it ... they were almost blinded.

The same message is conveyed in the Old Testament lesson. Moses comes down from the mountain bearing not only the Ten Commandments, but also bearing the visible marks of his communion with God. Moses' face shone *because he had been talking to God.* His transfigured appearance fills his kinsmen with awe, and he has to veil his face from them. Something extraordinary happened to Moses up on the mountain that illuminated his life to the extent that his face shone. He was changed inwardly, and his outward appearance gave it away. Moses' experience with God shone through his face ... very brightly ... quite noticeably. What a remarkable thing that is --- that God can be revealed through the human face ... that something of God can be revealed through your face.

In the gold fields around the town of Bannock, Montana many years ago, a small party of prospectors struck it rich in the early days of that territory's gold rush. After months of hardship and difficulty they located a rich vein, but needed more equipment for mining it. Before returning to Bannock for equipment, each prospector swore with his life that he would carefully guard their valuable secret ... and not breathe a word to anyone. They returned to Bannock and quietly assembled the equipment. But when they set out on the return journey, over 300 gold seekers followed them. Had someone broken his vow? No ... not at all! Their beaming faces had betrayed their secret.

It's like one parent telling a child not to tell the other parent a secret, but when that parent walks into the room and sees the face of that child, there is no keeping the secret. One author writes: *To the biblical writers, the face of a person is not a front to live one's life behind but a frontier, the outermost, visible edge of one's life in all its richness and multiplicity. The face is the way one has of being and of being seen.*

Standing in the presence of God, Moses is transfigured, changed ... changed so much so he cannot hide it. His face shone because he had been talking to God. While Jesus was talking / praying to God, the appearance of his face, as well, became different and his clothing became as white as a lightning's flash. What is happening here? What is the Bible trying to tell us? I believe that in the person of Moses, and particularly, in the person of Jesus, God reveals Himself. Such revelation cannot be hidden. It must be seen. The appearance is so vivid that those seeing are awakened. All doubt, all skepticism, and all wavering --- vanish in the twinkling of an eye. God breaks into the human realm, changes one's life, and such change is quite visible. It cannot be hidden. Each one of us during some time in our life have had mountaintop experiences ... during which we have stretched out our hands in prayer and asked God to be with us at this time of great need. And while praying, we have felt God's presence beyond the description of our words. We may have smiled! We may even have glowed!

Today's Gospel lesson is as great an event in Jesus' life as any other. Jesus is about to begin his final journey to Jerusalem and the cross. In the previous chapter, Jesus asked his disciples ... who did they believe him to be? He did so in order that he might discover if anyone had realized who he was. But there is one thing Jesus would never do. He would never take any step without the approval of God. In this story, in this scene on the mountain, we see Jesus seeking and receiving.

What exactly happened on the “Mount of Transfiguration” we can never know, however, we do know that something tremendous did happen. Jesus had gone there to seek the approval of God for the decisive step he was about to take. On that mountain Moses and Elijah appeared to him. Moses was the great lawgiver for the people of Israel. Elijah was the greatest of the prophets. It was as if they were telling Jesus to go forward. Now with such historical affirmation, Jesus could set with certainty his sight on Jerusalem ... certain that at least one little group of men knew who he was ... certain

that what he was doing was the consummation of all the life and thought and work of his nation, and certain that God approved of the step that he was taking.

There is one verse, one vivid sentence that caught my eye. It describes the three apostles' response to what they saw: *When they were fully awake they saw his glory*. In life we miss so much because our minds are asleep. There are certain characteristics of human nature that keep our minds asleep. For example, there is prejudice. We may be so set in our ideas or opinions that our minds are shut. A new idea knocks at the door, but we behave like we are asleep and refuse to awake. God may come to us in a way we least expect, but with our eyes strained narrowly in one direction, we fail to see. Yes, far too often we view life with eyelids shut, preventing the truth to penetrate. Our minds can be asleep in our prejudice.

Also, our minds can be asleep with mental lethargy. There are many who refuse the strenuous struggle of thought. Plato said: *The unexamined life is the life not worth living*. How many of us have really thought things out? How many times have we failed to stop and think about what we just said ... failed to examine our thoughts ... our statements ... our opinions. It was said of someone "he had skirted the howling deserts of faithlessness" and a wiser man said, "He would have been better to have fought his way through them." Sometimes we are so lethargic or stubborn, that we will not face our questions, our doubts. As people of faith, we are encouraged by God to bring our questions and doubts, to ask our whys, and have God address them.

Yes, when our minds are asleep, there is the "love of ease." There is a kind of defense mechanism in us that makes us automatically shut down, shut the door against any disturbing thought. We have ways of drugging ourselves mentally until our minds are sound asleep. But life is full of experiences designed to waken us. Often times, people speak of such personal experiences as their "wake-up call" or "being hit over the head!"

During those times there can be great sorrow. A music teacher once said of a young singer, who was technically perfect, but quite without feeling and expression: *She will be great when something breaks her heart*. Often sorrow can rudely awaken us, but in that moment through the tears ... we see the glory!

Then there are those times of love. Somewhere Browning tells of two people who fell in love. She looked at him; he looked at her – "and suddenly life awoke." Someone said that *real love is an awakening to horizons we never dreamed were there*.

Then there are times when we have a true sense of need. Far too long we may live the routine of life half asleep ... then all of a sudden there comes some completely insoluble problem, some quite unanswerable question, some overmastering temptation; some summons to an effort which we feel is beyond our strength.

On that day ... in that moment ... there is nothing left to do but to let go and let God ... to bow our heads and pray to God to see us through. All the times of great need in our life can be times that awaken us to God. Therefore, we would do well to pray these words: *Lord keep me always awake to You*. There are times we need to be fully awake, before it's too late to do what we must do: repent ... change ... commit ... grow closer to God.

This coming Wednesday begins a new season. The Season of Lent is an awakening time. It is a time to present ourselves to God that we may be transfigured ... that we may be changed by God's grace ... that we, too, may bear the visible marks of our baptism and communion with God, in order that our faces may shine with a genuine belief ... with such a genuine belief that all who see us know there is a God!

**Prayer:** O Christ who upon the mountaintop was transfigured before amazed disciples show us your glory. We have come here today, to this time of worship, from many different places. Some of us have come here confused; transform our confusion to firm assurance of Your power in our world. Some of us have come here full of doubt; transform our doubt into sure belief. Some of us have come here fearful of what lies ahead for us in the future; give us that quiet confidence that comes from our faith in Your lordship. Some of us have come here tossed to and fro by various kinds of temptations; offer us the strength we need to resist temptation in whatever forms they present themselves. Gracious God, we have come here this morning seeking You because, in numerous ways in our lives, we have felt You seeking us. Show us Your glory, O Lord. Transform us into the disciples You would have us to be. Amen!!