

I can't think about Transfiguration Sunday without thinking about mountains. There are lots of mountains I've driven up or lived on in my days of working as a summer camp counselor, but there is always one in particular that sticks out to me.

Several years ago, I was in Phoenix for the ordination of a really good friend and seminary classmate. There were several of us in town and we were looking for something active to do since all we had been doing so far was getting in as much Mexican food as we possibly could. There was a nearby trail that this friend hiked pretty frequently, so we got up early and piled into a car.

We drove to the mountain and parked, got out and began to hike. We continued to talk on the way up, sharing stories from our time apart and reminiscing about times we'd had together. We discussed our future hopes and dreams for our ministry. It was a comfortable hike, not too strenuous. It was sunny, but not hot and there was a pleasant breeze from time to time.

Finally, we approached the top and our conversation came to an end, as if we had somehow telepathically agreed to stop talking. We stood in a line and looked out over the wild desert. It was one of those moments when everything seems perfect, when time seems to stand still. It was quiet, with wind rustling the brush. After a few moments, someone said something along the lines of "What an awesome Creator we have." And we all agreed. What an *awesome* Creator we have!

There's something about that moment. Something about being on that mountain. There's something about being on *any* mountain. It's what they call that "mountain top experience."

What is it about the mountain top? It's important. It's transcendent. The mountain top pulls us away from the everyday distractions of work or school, or troubled relationships. It pulls us away from the constant barrage of Facebook updates and twenty-four-hour news cycles. We are met with a grand expanse of creation—and the great power and imagination of our Creator.

The mountain-top has the unique ability to make us feel both greater and smaller at the same time. We feel as if we can see everything, almost as if we can touch everything...and we also realize that things that look large up close appear tiny and insignificant from far away. The mountain-top experience is something we can't explain, but it's a terribly precious and profound way to encounter God.

On Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, we begin Lent, which is almost a symbolic climb. Throughout Lent, we journey with Jesus through his ministry and his passion and, eventually, to his crucifixion. During Lent, we climb the hill of Golgotha with Jesus; we climb, expecting to find Christ at the top that mountain.

The Bible is filled with stories of finding God at mountain-tops: Moses' experience with burning bush and the Ten Commandments are probably the most well-known examples. There's the story of Abraham binding Isaac, among others. But this morning, we hear another familiar story about a mountain.

Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a mountain and—all of a sudden—his clothes turn to a brilliant, blinding white and his face begins to shine like the sun and—even more amazing!—the voice of God comes and claims Jesus as the beloved, Son of God. It's incredible, so much so that Peter wants to build dwellings and stay. And who can blame him? I'd want to stay!

But they *don't* stay. And that's perhaps the best part of this story. Jesus and these three disciples don't stay on the mountain, they come back down.

Something amazing had happened there. Something life-changing occurred at the top of that mountain. The disciples encountered God and had a mountain-top experience...but then they left. They came back *down* the mountain; they came back *with* Jesus.

It would have been easy to stay up there. They were separated from the rest of the world and could have avoided lots of trouble. It would have been easy to let the rest of the world go on while they enjoyed the transcendence of that space. But Jesus doesn't choose the easy peace of that transcendence. Jesus comes down, even knowing that coming down will eventually lead to his death.

Because Jesus doesn't want to stay up, to stay separate, to stay in that "holy place."

Instead, Jesus comes down and gets into the work he came to do: healing, teaching, building relationships. Jesus comes down and the *whole world* becomes holy. Jesus comes down and makes the entire world a place where we can encounter Christ, where we can encounter God, because it's a place where the work of God is done.

Have you heard anything about a revival happened at Asbury University in Kentucky?

As a normal weekday chapel service wound down on February 8<sup>th</sup>...it just never stopped. Music continued. Students stayed and continued to pray. And it's been going on ever since, with some folks sticking around over night to keep the continuity of worship. It's been over ten days now, and it's still going on. People have come out of state and even from other countries for the chance to participate.

In the social media circles I'm a part of, I've seen three reactions:

First, there is awe and excitement. These folks are cheering it on and are thrilled that people are experiencing something transcendent and powerful there. It's a mountain-top experience, stretched out over days and days.

Second, there is straight up skepticism. This is from the group of people who have typically experienced God move in quieter, less obvious ways, or who have been hurt by churches that have shown similar displays are quick to ask, “What’s the point?” or “Wouldn’t it be better if they were feeding people?” These are the folks looking for the work in the world, looking to see and encounter Jesus in those acts of teaching, healing, feeling, connecting.

Finally, there’s a third group. I think this is the group I fall in. It’s an honest curiosity. The style of worship I see happening is not my main life experience. It’s not my preferred style of worship. But I can’t help but think that the Spirit could be doing something pretty incredible there, even if it’s only part of the story. *And* it’s the group that says that we don’t need to act as if worship and God’s work in the world are two mutually exclusive options and that we must abandon one to participate in the other.

It’s a balance that we are called to strike—a balance between the mountain top and the time spent engaged in ministry down below. One is not better than the other, or more important than the other.

Our time spent in worship is what inspires and sustains us in what we do outside of devotion, and prayer, and community. And our work in the world is what informs our experiences in worship.

Jesus went to the mountain top. And Jesus *came back down*.

The whole world is a holy place, a place where we can encounter God. I wonder where you might encounter God next.

Amen.