

### “Coming Down from the Mountaintop”

I love television and movies. I also love theology. Well, when these two things come together I get really excited. In fact, I kind of “geek out” when this happens. The SciFi series “Battlestar Gallactica” is one of these shows I geek out over. So is ABC’s “Lost.” These shows have these rich and sometimes confusing storylines but throughout both of these series is a very strong religious overtone. My best friend and I will regularly be in discussion over who we think is portraying Jesus in an episode, or who is portraying Judas. Was that episode more Old Testament based or New Testament? I know, it’s a very geeky thing to do. Today’s gospel reading makes me think of a movie in which a character becomes transfigured in the biblical model. In “Lord of the Rings, The Two Towers” the wizard Gandolf the Grey is transformed through suffering and triumph into Gandolf the White. And even though this transfiguration happens off screen, when he returns from his exile, his entrance is shrouded in a cloud of blinding white light, his face is shining, his robes are white, his hair and beard are white. Tolkein, the author of the “Lord of the Rings” series was a devout Christian and was definitely relying on a biblical framework when he wrote about Gandolf’s metamorphosis.

It is interesting to me when our Christian story comes back to us in movies, or television, or books, or theater. We are able to encounter information and stories that we have heard over and over in a new way. This scene in “The Lord of the Rings” offers us a glimpse of what it might have been like on the mountain when Jesus was transfigured. But only a glimpse. Because we cannot even comprehend what Peter, James, and John witnessed that day.

This story of the transfiguration is found in three of the four gospels. And it is rich with meaning. Every year we hear about the three disciples who witnessed this event trembling in fear and awe. And every year we hear Peter become a bumbling fool and volunteer to make the glory of this event permanent, to keep this amazing, magical event up on the mountain by building three dwelling places. One for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.

The presence of Moses and Elijah is of key importance to the transfiguration story. Moses was the great giver of the law in the Old Testament, the founder of the universal law of the Ten Commandments. Jesus, like Moses before him, was about to set God’s people free, not from their bondage to pharaoh, but their bondage from sin, death, and the grave. Elijah, was the greatest of the Jewish prophets. His presence was the divine seal of approval. Elijah’s reappearance on earth meant that the Messiah was pretty close behind. For Peter, James, and John, three Jewish men, raised on the teachings of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah), just seeing those three there together on the mountain would have been enough. Add to this scene some dazzling bright light, brighter than anything they had ever seen before it’s no wonder that Peter wanted to stay up on the mountain in the glowing presence of the Messiah, the Lawgiver, and the Prophet – that is what God’s glory was all about, right – basking in the glow of these most holy people – seeing the Messiah in his dazzling white robes?

But, a cloud came. A cloud came and interrupted Peter’s plan to build three dwelling places. And a voice, a voice stops him midsentence and says – “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” And just as quickly as it happened, it was over. Moses and Elijah were gone. Jesus was alone. The lightning appearance of Jesus’ clothes was gone. The cloud was gone. It was silent. Jesus, Peter, James, and John walk back down the mountain, back to reality, back to work.

My husband Josh loves to watch those “extreme” television shows. Shows like “Deadliest Catch” and “Ice Road Truckers.” Well, one of the shows he recently got into is called “Everest:

Beyond the Limit.” This show follows a group of people as they try to climb Mt. Everest, the tallest mountain in the world. They don’t do this alone; of course, they have the guidance of an expert climbing guide, Russell Brice and his sherpas. Now, I really know nothing about mountain climbing. But, I never knew that climbing Mt. Everest is such a long process. Not only the months and months that go into training, and raising the money, and preparing mentally for the climb, but the climb to the summit itself is a long process. When the hikers get to the first base camp on the mountain they have to wait a whole week just so their bodies can acclimate to the altitude. During this week the climbers are monitored by a doctor and Russell, the climbing guide, to see how their bodies are adjusting. Then, they climb up to the second base camp so their climbing skills can be assessed. And then they climb back down. After two days of rest they climb up to the third base camp. And then they climb back down. Then, after two more days, if the doctor and Russell approve them for the climb to the summit they begin their trek.

When and if they get to the summit (because a lot of the climbers who attempt it never actually get there) they are only allowed to stay for a half an hour. Obviously, for those that do make it to the summit of Mt. Everest, it is a very emotional experience. Many weep, some even fall on their knees with their faces to the ground.

And then it’s over. These people who have climbed to the top of the highest mountain in the world, who would certainly say that in their lives, this was their mountain top experience, a moment that they want to hold on to for the rest of their lives. They have to climb back down the mountain, back to reality. Sure there is much rejoicing and celebration when they get off the mountain, but that too will end. And then what?

Each of us has our own mountain top experience. Something that was life changing. A moment where we felt truly blessed, where we could feel the bright light of God shining all around us, a moment where we felt connected to God with all of our being. A moment that we never wanted to end. Maybe it was your wedding day, or the birth of your child. Or maybe your mountain top experience was when you completed a marathon, or went on a trip to an exotic land, or your first day at college, or your graduation... But, we always have to return to reality. These mountain top experiences are beautiful memories, memories that I hope sustain you in difficult times. But what about those days where we aren’t on the mountain top and aren’t necessarily in the valley? What about those days that are just regular, ordinary days? Being honest, we don’t spend much time on the mountain tops, nor do we spend a lot of time down in the valley. We spend most of our time living plain, regular, ordinary days. Days that seem to just fly by. We often feel like we have lost our connection to God on those ordinary days. I know I feel that way at times. Sometimes I feel like I blink and a whole week has passed. A whole week where nothing really happened. But even on those regular days, God has not disconnected from us. God is all around us. Yes, God is in the magnificent, glorious, wonderful, mountain top experiences. And God is in the difficult, low points, the valleys of life. But God is in the ordinary too. Talking with a friend, taking a walk, watching snowflakes fall, listening to your favorite musician, listening to nothing, eating breakfast, reading a book... God is there, all around you in everyday, plain, regular, ordinary life. Amen.