

When We Come Down from the Mountain

On this Transfiguration Sunday, our second Scripture reading is connected with the first one from Mark 9. Jesus leads his inner group of disciples, Peter, James and John, to a high mountain where they witness his transfiguration, a “mountaintop experience,” when Jesus appearance became physically glorious and he received a supernatural visit from Elijah and Moses. This experience of worship was of crucial importance to Jesus in preparing him for his final journey to the cross. It was so inspirational and awe-inspiring to the disciples that Peter wanted to remain on the mountain. But Jesus showed them that the mountaintop was not where they were to remain, but that they needed to return to the valley and join him in service, where they happen upon the other disciples surrounded by a large crowd, in a disturbing situation.

Follow as I read **Mark 9:14-29:**

¹⁴ When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵ When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶ He asked them, “What are you arguing about with them?” ¹⁷ Someone from the crowd answered him, “Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸ and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so.” ¹⁹ He answered them, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” ²⁰ And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹ Jesus asked the father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. ²² It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” ²³ Jesus said to him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” ²⁴ Immediately the father of the child cried out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” ²⁵ When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!” ²⁶ After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, “He is dead.” ²⁷ But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸ When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” ²⁹ He said to them, “This kind can come out only through prayer.”

We call exceptionally inspirational and moving worship times “mountaintop experiences.” This term may well have its origin in the Transfiguration of Jesus, which occurred on a mountain, and which was a glorious experience for the inner core of Jesus’ disciples. Peter had an impulse to build three shelters (5), maybe to prolong that mountaintop worship experience. But Jesus, after that worship experience, led the three disciples down from the mountain. “Mountaintop”

experiences don't last forever. "Mountaintop" experiences of worship occur occasionally, but are followed by the valleys of everyday life and struggles. (Exodus 32; 1 Kings 18-19). Even after the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension back to heaven, the disciples had to go to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. And, after the Holy Spirit came in the ecstatic worship of Pentecost, the church had to go into the "mean streets" of Jerusalem, where they met with resistance, opposition and even intense persecution (Acts 1-5).

So, God gives us mountaintop worship experiences to prepare us to go down from the spiritual ecstasy to minister in the valleys of spiritual and material need. As much as we would like to stay on the mountain, we cannot. As someone has said, we would all rather remain on the spiritual mountaintop rather than "slog through the trenches of everyday life," but we simply cannot (D Garland).

Our Scripture text was an important word to the church in Rome, where Mark was addressing his gospel. This was a church facing severe persecution at the hands of a pagan and hostile Roman Empire. Mark wanted his fellow believers to know that just as the three disciples were given a grand worship experience to prepare them for the valley, so Jesus will go with them after every experience of worship together. The mountaintop prepared Jesus to face the final road to the cross with the assurance of the Father's will and approval of him and his mission (7). And it was also to prepare him for his continuing and demanding ministry to human need, as with the boy with the evil spirit. This boy in our text was a "textbook case" of a nearly hopeless situation. He was plagued by epilepsy, could not speak, and was possessed by a demon. His life at best was self-destructive, and in the eyes of the world, hopeless. His father had brought him to the disciples as a last and only resort for his healing and deliverance and the disciples had failed. And then the crowd gathered to dispute with the disciples.

We don't have to go very far to find unmet and desperate needs around us. In fact, as was true for these disciples, the world will come to us with their needs, expecting us to do something for them. This man had heard of Jesus, the compassionate miracle-worker, and he knew Jesus had a group of followers, these disciples, whom Jesus had sent out with power to also preach, heal the sick, and cast out demons (6:12-13). There are problems all around us that beg for solutions. Likely there are needs right in your own circle of friends, perhaps in your own life as well—physical, emotional, financial, relational, or even spiritual. We as followers of our Lord Jesus Christ know that being a Christ follower doesn't result in the immediate elimination of our problems! The crowd no doubt wondered why the followers of Jesus, who had worked miracles in other places, couldn't help this desperate man with his needy son.

We hear cries, such as, "You Christians claim to believe in Jesus Christ and the power of prayer, don't you? Then why can't you help me? Why won't your prayers help my child? Why do I still have problems in my marriage, with my kids and with my job?"

Just like these disciples, our church's ministry and our own claim to a relationship with Christ puts us on trial. Unbelievers hold their problems and even our problems before us and say, "Fix it!" I like the name of a computer repair business near our home: "You Break, I Fix." That's what some expect of the Christian faith—a quick fix to their problems.

The disciples had been given access to Jesus' power and authority (6:12), yet somewhere along the line they had "lost it." Like the epileptic/demon-possessed boy, the world is "thrown to the ground" (18, NIV). Your wellbeing, your health, your job, your marriage, your children, may be "thrown to the ground." You haven't been able nor has anyone else been able to pick up the pieces of your life. And, maybe you've come to others, including the church, and no one is able to help pick you or your life or your family up from the ground.

When Jesus arrived the reasons for the disciples' failure became apparent. They had been acting as though Jesus didn't exist, which is the heart of unbelief. Perhaps that is why they crowd was overwhelmed with wonder when he came upon them. They suddenly realized he's the missing ingredient. Even though these nine disciples who missed out on the transfiguration were Jesus' followers and servants, they had ceased to depend on him and had begun to do religious work in their own strength. As we can see from the gospels, Jesus had appointed and commissioned the twelve disciples and had sent them out on mission. They were given power to preach and authority to drive our demons. And they were successful in their ministry (3:13-15; 6:7-13). But somewhere along the way they had forgotten to be people of prayer who worship before the throne of God, on the mountaintop.

After confronting the failure of the disciples, Jesus healed the boy, both physically and spiritually. In fact, our text indicates Jesus raised this boy from death itself. Then, the disciples wanted to know why they couldn't do what Jesus did. He reminded them that what he did could be duplicated only by prayer. Prayer is open admission of our need for God. The disciples had tried to do God-type work without God's power, which is available only through prayer. The world watches to see if we can make a difference. What difference does Jesus make?

Ernest Campbell says the church is to be known as "the household of faith," yet we are suffering an identity crisis. He tells of a bewildered foreign visitor to the New York City Public Library. He had heard it was one of the great libraries of the world, housing hundreds of thousands of books. Yet, as he climbed the great staircases, passed scores of statues and portraits, and arrived on the main floor with countless tables and personnel offices, he finally asked in frustration, "But where are the books?" This reminds me of the old Wendy's ad, "Where's the beef?" *Where's our faith?*

People have heard about Jesus, and that he has followers known as his church. He works through prayer, they have heard, and his followers live and serve others with compassion. If they see our typical lives and usual ways of doing church, they may ask, "But where's the faith, the power? Where's the difference in your life? Where are the answered prayers? Where's the love? Can they see Jesus in us, and do they think more of Jesus because of us? When Jesus asked what all the fuss was about, the father stepped forward and described his son's horrible symptoms, and then told about the failure of Jesus' disciples to heal the boy. Jesus then replied with exasperation, "O unbelieving generation...how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to *me*" (19, NIV).

When the disciples got away from the crowd, after Jesus had healed the boy, they asked him why they weren't able to do what he had just done. Somehow they had missed the lesson of faith Jesus had taught the father of the boy. He had confessed he believed Jesus could heal his son, but also acknowledged he needed help with his unbelief. Now the disciples were ready to do what we must also do, acknowledge the need for his power. The disciples were very much aware that they had failed in the ministry Jesus had given them. Like these disciples we too are aware of the needs around us. Apart from Jesus and his power the boy was "thrown to the ground." Maybe there is someone in your sphere of influence, in your neighborhood, or even in your family who is a "throw-away" person.

As these disciples, we too must acknowledge that until Jesus arrives, there's no power within us. In the face of needs, we need to confess with the father of the boy, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" We gather in the house of worship, and see the glory of Jesus and hear his word of promise and challenge. We even sense the presence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. But when we go out those exits, the power doesn't seem to follow past the parking lot. We have little witness in our lives and words.

Our great challenge as a church is to leave these exits in this worship center with the mountaintop of the Spirit's fullness in our lives. Our corporate worship and prayer experiences should prepare us for lives of prayer and personal worship throughout the week. Our walk with Jesus should and must be in the power of the Holy Spirit. See the contrast between the frustrated, prayer-less, worship-less disciples in the valley, and the Lord Jesus and the inner ring of disciples who come down off of the mountain of prayer and worship. Jesus teaches us that the way to live in the valley is to carry the mountaintop of worship and prayer in our hearts. God will "transfigure," i.e. transform us into more Christ-likeness.

What will a mountaintop do for you? Restoring a broken relationship? Breaking a self-destructive habit? Finding joy and peace? Maybe, as a follower of Jesus you're at a crisis point in your life. You have a mind to believe, yet right now you are struggling with unbelief, perhaps because of some disappointment or

discouraging circumstances that have caused you to doubt God's love and purpose for your life. As one has said, belief and unbelief are mixed in most of us (RT France). You and I need to say to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

The late Francis Schaeffer and his wife Edith operated L'Abri Retreat Center in the Swiss Alps for many years, designed to minister to those who're struggling to discover or maintain faith in Christ. L'Abri is a French word meaning "shelter," and indeed the Schaeffers provided spiritual shelter for thousands of the confused and seekers after faith. One young man who had spent some weeks under Francis and Edith Schaeffer's teaching and caring ministry eventually was restored to spiritual health. When the time came for his departure from the beautiful mountain retreat to return to his home and work in a difficult section of Chicago, he expressed his fears to the Schaeffers. "I'm afraid that when I return to the mean streets of Chicago I'll find that God isn't real there." Francis Schaeffer replied, "If God isn't real in the mean streets of Chicago, then don't bother to return here. Because if he isn't real in the streets of Chicago then he will not be real here either."

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With the mountain in their hearts.*

(R Langley)