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Transfiguration
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Have any of you been to the Haleakala Volcano on the island of Maui at sunrise? It is on the tourist “to-do” list there, and in predawn darkness a parade of tour vans wind their way up the road every morning, hoping for a clear day. Near the top, the landscape becomes desert-like. Strange prehistoric plants like silverswords and protea grow there and nowhere else on earth. Often engulfed by a chilly mist (chilly is a relative term in Hawaii, met easily with a sweater), people perch on benches at the western edge of the crater and hope that clouds will allow them to see a spectacular sunrise over the eastern ridge, illuminating the whole mountain and beyond. Heaven touches earth. It is spectacular. No wonder the Hawaiians named it “House of the Sun”, or Haleakala.

From the infancy of our species we have been climbing mountains. Most people living in the foothills have probably experienced a mystical high on a mountaintop somewhere, at least once in a lifetime. We have both the Greens and the Adirondacks beckoning us here. Or perhaps if you are a true climber, you’ve been in some other magnificent mountain range, in Hawaii, the Rockies, the Alps, the Andes, even the Himalayas.

What IS it about mountains that make them such “thin places”? What do I mean by that? Many mystical moments in human consciousness have happened at high altitude. The meeting place of earth with heaven, the realm of invisible divine forces. Oxygen is thinner at high altitudes, and that impacts our brains. The flora and fauna are also different, and the great distance of clear view is almost unbelievable. That

expanse of vision instills an openness of mind and heart, especially if you've just physically exerted yourself on the climb.

Human tradition adds to the mystique. Those cultures that develop near mountains have myths about them. Jesus and his friends were raised with the many mountaintop stories of the Hebrew Bible, beginning with Noah's ark landing on Mount Ararat and continuing through Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai as we read this morning. The prophet Elijah also had a profound mountain experience of God while fleeing from Queen Jezebel's wrath. It is no accident that Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophetic strands of Hebrew tradition, were the two figures that appeared with Jesus in today's gospel.

Peter, James and John, Jesus' first and closest disciples, go with him unquestioningly on this hike up the mountain: some of us might have second thoughts about such a vigorous day hike. By their quick obedience they have given themselves the opportunity for a prize without price: a mystical vision, a moment outside of linear time which we often call by the Greek word "Kairos." The vision lasts only a moment, a tiny fraction by measure of our watches, and at the same time it is eternal and always present, always available to the one who has experienced it. It is neither past nor future, but eternally present.

We are reminded of our human capacity for transcendence at least once per year when we share this gospel story. That kind of mystical experience that can sustain us for the very long and very difficult parts of our human journey. Like the disciples that day, we all have to go back down the mountain to where we live, into the valleys of human reality and suffering. We all have to go back down to death.

It is my prayer that in every life, there will be at least one mystical moment in which we are divinely assured of who and whose we are. In Jesus' own human life, there were only two times that the voice of God was heard, at least publicly, both of which stories

we have read in this season of Epiphany now ending. The first was at Jesus' baptism in the river, and the second was on this mountaintop.

“This is my beloved child.” What if every one of us could call upon that affirmation, by sight or by sound, whenever we needed it? That momentary glimpse of eternity could sustain us heartily if we let it.

In most mystical traditions, you will find description of threshold between the worlds, the “thin places.” Perhaps you will remember them in the Narnian Chronicles, full of special doorways that pass between worlds. The one in the first book was in the back of the coat closet. But the second return is through a doorway drawn in thin air by Aslan the lion, who is the Christ figure in the story. Ultimately Aslan tells the children that the whole idea of journeying between these worlds is to be able to find him and to rely upon his presence even when they are back in the valley of their own world. That's a pretty good description of how “transfiguration” functions in the lives of Jesus' disciples. When they go back down the mountain, warned by Jesus not to say anything, and they get back to their everyday lives full of trouble, they will always have with them that vision of Jesus shining, shining with the power of the eternal world beyond. It's not really about Jesus' Majestic Glory so much as it is about the mystery and power of God's presence in the lives of those who follow him.

In this point in time, in the world we live in, many of us feel as though we are slogging through a society that has suddenly become more hateful, less welcoming, more cold and selfish. You can fill in the blanks for your own experience of this time, but there are moments in which the pain of the stories we hear in the news overwhelm us, in which we find ourselves constantly choking back tears and wondering how our small efforts can turn back the tide of inhumanity. In addition to the broad challenges of rapid-fire changes in both law enforcement and hate crimes, many of us face major health and well-being challenges in our close family and friend networks. It is a mighty trial to remain open to mystery and transcendence of our God as we trudge through the mud.

And there is an element of fear in this story that we haven't touched on yet. What if you were one of these three guys and suddenly you see something totally unreal and then you hear this booming voice coming out of the cloud

“This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

And the disciples fall apart. They fall on their faces on the ground. Bright lights, voices, breakdown of reality. They are reduced to trembling lumps of flesh, huddling on the cold granite mountainside. They are incapacitated. Surely we can relate to this feeling. Some of us are getting used to feeling terrified and helpless much of the time.

Then there is this incredible moment, something that is easy to rush right past in the text, without paying much attention. Right after the description of their abject terror, it says:

“Jesus came and touched them.” (repeat)

Now close your eyes, and try to picture how he might have touched them. Did he reach down and rub them on the back in a gesture of healing and comfort? Did he squat down beside them and take their faces between his hands and look intently into their eyes? Or did he reach over and tousle their hair and raise them to a standing position by offering a hand? We don't know, but whatever the gesture, it must have been tremendously reassuring. One important truth of this story we have already talked about: the disciples finally understood that Jesus is fully divine, that the mystery of God shines through him not only on the mountaintop but in every moment of daily life.

An equally important second truth is that they finally felt God's presence in the touch of a human being. It is that touch which gives us the spirit and the power and the sheer chutzpah to go on living, and to go on serving, others even in the midst of overwhelming pain. God with us, Emmanuel, not just as a baby, but as a friend, as an adult. In one touch, the disciples knew it.

Now I'm a touch-feely sort of person anyway, as some of you already know. Sometimes I pass the boundaries of Yankee comfort zones, and I try to be sensitive to that. I am a New Englander by birth, but my family of origin was very affectionate. The clincher was all those years spent in warm climate like Mexico and Hawaii. My Hawaiian congregation had me well trained by the time I left: hugs and kisses all round. I don't want to be apologetic about touching, though, because the ministry of human touch clearly begins with Jesus in the gospel, and is part God's work we inherit. Those who have raised children know how much children need your physical presence when they are frightened or physically hurt.

Don't you think that Jesus touching of his friends there on the mountainside had a similar healing and energizing effect? Sure, he could've just barked an order at them: Get up, you lazy scaredy-cats! Why are you on the ground? Let's get on down the mountain and get back to our business."

But that's not who Jesus is. He touches them. He wants them to know that he is still with them, in the same way he had been, as a friend and a teacher. "It's me!" he was saying with his touch. "I am still with you. I am not a ghost. I am not a vision. I am your friend and your teacher, and I will be here with you, as long as it takes, in body and in spirit, for you to find the courage to get back to work we will find in the valley below. "

Then they had the treasured Kairos moment of seeing and carrying with them Christ's divinity, his eternity. It was important for his friends to know something of his true identity, at least to the extent that human imagination can grasp it. And it was equally important that they continued to know him as a human being, someone who could see things from their point of view, someone who had experienced all the joys and sorrows of human living. Somehow on that mountain, those friends learned to see with a double vision, experiencing Jesus as both human and divine. Perhaps, in a subtle way, they learned the same thing about themselves.

Human, yes: we are undeniably and terminally human. We are human when we find ourselves huddling on the ground with fear, worrying about all the overwhelming realities of our lives. And we are just as human when we find the inner strength and courage to walk down that mountain path and back into the midst of human need, back to the people who will benefit from our warm and healing touch. Sometimes we are terrified, sometimes we are courageous. At all times we are human.

And we are also imbued with a touch of the divine. The one who stands in glory on the mountaintop, the one who can see for miles into eternity, the one whose power to heal and to do good is inexhaustible and eternal – that one has reached out to touch us and make us whole. When you are unsure or doubtful or afraid, or just plain tired and discouraged, listen to Jesus. Let his love and his wisdom and his strength shine forth upon you, to give you strength and courage.

Strive to find time in your busy, worried lives to visit a thin place, if possible in person, but if not, then in your memory. There you will discover that the only real truth is timeless Love. And once we know and can remember that, we can get through whatever life dishes out with courageous commitment. Perhaps you have already been fortunate enough to have such a glimpse in your lifetime. And if not yet, then seek it. Be open to it. Walking through the valleys of the shadow becomes very possible when you can rely on the shining light of Love.

Exodus 24:12-18

The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.”

Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud over-shadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."