

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Transfiguration Sunday 2012 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

On the last Sunday before Lent we always have a reading about the so-called “Transfiguration.” Jesus takes three of his most trusted disciples to a high mountain, and he is “transfigured” before their very eyes; his clothes become a dazzling white, “such as no one on earth could bleach them.” They are terrified. And then Peter, who seems to always say the wrong thing, suggests that they make three dwellings. Even though Peter is terrified, he wants to somehow hang on to this experience.

On Transfiguration Sunday we often talk about “mountaintop experiences.” Being at the top of the mountain is exhilarating. What a sense of accomplishment! You made it to the summit! But then, you have to come back down; back down to the real world.

Today we have the ultimate mountaintop experience: baptisms! And today we are baptizing, instead of infants or small children, two adolescents, who are old enough to make these incredible baptismal promises themselves, with help from God and their parents and grandmother and all of us.

Baptism can be a mountaintop experience; but then, we have to come back down the mountain, and begin an everyday Christian life.

When we're climbing mountains, we're motivated to get to the top. And then once we get there, sometimes it can actually be a bit of a letdown, unlike the transfiguration scene we read about today. I bet some of you have read Jon Krakauer's classic that came out about 14 years ago, *Into Thin Air*,¹ about an expedition to Mount Everest in which many lives were lost. Krakauer, a journalist, opened his account with his experience at the summit of Everest. He writes how he had been fantasizing about that moment of being at the top of the mountain for months. But once he was actually there, he wrote, he “just couldn't summon the energy to care.” He hadn't slept in 57 hours and had hardly eaten in the oxygen-depleted atmosphere. A very different mountaintop experience than the one described in today's Gospel reading.

When Gary and I were discussing mountains and mountaintops yesterday, he reminded me that, when we're talking about extreme mountains, like Everest or any of the peaks that require specialized equipment and teams of people so that a few can stand on the summit for a few moments: on such expeditions, more people actually die coming down the mountain than do ascending.

More people die coming *down* off the mountain. Coming down is especially dangerous.

And that was the case with Krakauer's 1996 expedition: lives were lost on the descent from that mountain.

¹ Krakauer, Jon, *Into Thin Air*, New York: Anchor, 1998.

Many of us Christians experience mountaintop experiences of faith. We reach the top through different means: perhaps when we feel the bishop's hands on our head after months of studying for confirmation, perhaps through a stirring choir anthem; or, a mountaintop experience happens to us outside of church: in a room at home; on a hiking trail; at a Cursillo weekend; at the birth of a child. At once, we recognize the glory of God. We are strong in our faith.

For that mountaintop moment.

For me, every baptism is a mountaintop. I get emotional. I am amazed and humbled to rub oil that was blessed by my bishop onto a forehead and tell the new Christian, "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked by Christ's own forever."

But I know that baptism is not a mountaintop experience for everyone. Some babies cry (especially if I get water in their eyes). And for some baptismal candidates, the experience might be more along the lines of Jon Krakauer's summit experience: we might be too tired to get excited.

And, we know that the hard work of the Christian journey is only beginning at baptism. Like with other climbing expeditions, coming down the mountain can be dangerous. Like Peter, I wish we could build structures on the mountain and just stay in that exhilarating place; I wish we could baptize every single Sunday; but, we have God's work to do back down off the mountain. We are just starting a spiritual journey.

And coming down the mountain can be dangerous.

I read a book a little over a week ago that took my breath away: *Still*,² by Lauren Winner. About ten years ago, I read another book by the same author, entitled *Girl Meets God*.³ That book was her conversion from Orthodox Judaism to Christianity—to Anglicanism, in fact. She had become entranced by the Mitford series of books about an Episcopal priest named Father Tim in North Carolina, and she then came to know and love Jesus powerfully. *Girl Meets God* was a fun, exhilarating book.

Her new book, *Still*, has a subtitle: "Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis." Winner studied religion at Duke and received a PhD. She faithfully attends an Episcopal church. She teaches at preaching conferences and is a popular and respected Christian speaker. She wrote a couple of other best-selling books about Christianity after *Girl Meets God*.

² Winner, Lauren, *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, New York: HarperOne, 2012.

³ _____, *Girl Meets God*, Algonquin, 2002.

And none of this inoculated her from a crisis of faith. Winner wasn't able to stay at the top of the mountain with Jesus. After she filed for a divorce, she experienced a serious crisis of faith, and wasn't able to find Jesus the way she used to.

Coming down from the mountain is a lot harder. Real life is a lot harder.

And God created us for real life. Jesus didn't stay with Peter and James and John on top of that mountain; instead, he led them back down. And remember, coming down from the mountaintop is dangerous. Jesus led them to Jerusalem and to all the darkness they encountered there. They went from the mountain to the glory of Palm Sunday, to the depths of Good Friday, to the astonishment of Easter Sunday and Christ's ascension from yet another mountain; and then, after another mountaintop experience with Jesus at his Ascension, these disciples built the Church, the Christian Church with a capital C that we are all a part of today.

God didn't create us to stay on the mountain, building tributes to transcendent experiences. Today's psalm has something to say about that, although we only read the first six verses in worship this morning. This psalm, Psalm 50, is one of my absolute favorites. It's actually something known as a "covenant lawsuit," where God makes a case against God's people—suing them, suing *us*, for breach of contract.

There's a sentence I use right before our offering, called the "offertory sentence"—if you're a church nerd, you might like to know that these sentences can be found on page 376 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. There are eight options. I chose the one I use each week—"Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and make good your vows to the most high"—I choose it each week because it comes from Psalm 50, today's psalm.

Because it's a lawsuit, and has strong languages, and even a little cursing, it's hard to find a way to use this psalm in Sunday worship. I believe the editors who pick the readings we get on Sundays chose the first six verses of this psalm because of their dramatic depiction of God: God has called the earth from the rising of the sun; God "reveals himself in glory"; there's a consuming flame and a raging storm. This dramatic language is appropriate for a mountaintop experience on Transfiguration Sunday, where Jesus becomes dazzling white to his disciples.

But this psalm, in the sentences we don't use, has something to say to use about mountaintop experiences and about how God wants us to live our regular lives, which don't take place on top of a mountain.

God has some harsh words to say about worship in this psalm. At the time these psalms were used, and at the time of Jesus, animal sacrifices were made to God in the temple. This was how God was honored before Jesus.

But in this psalm, God seems to say that such sacrifice is not the point. In the lawsuit portion of this psalm, God makes the case that God knows all the creature of the world, so offering them to God is not what God's looking for from us.

Rather, God wants our lives to be transformed as a result of worship, as a result of our spiritual journey.

The last verse of Psalm 50 is this:

“Whoever offers me the sacrifice of thanksgiving honors me;

But to those who keep in my way will I show the salvation of God.”

In other words, it's not only about how we worship, but about how we live our lives.

In the lawsuit part of Psalm 50, God asks why we recite statutes and take God's covenant on our lips, but then behave as we always have, loosing our lips for evil, telling lies, speaking against our brothers and sisters.

We aren't supposed to stop at the mountain; we aren't supposed to only look for God on Sunday mornings at church; rather, we are to live a transformed life after we come down from the mountain. We are to live like Christians not only Sunday mornings, but Monday through Saturday.

Today we are blessed with a baptism, but that is only the beginning. Baptism will not banish doubt; rather, in baptism, we begin our Christian journey; a glorious beginning, of a spiritual pilgrimage that will be plagued with challenges. As we renew our own baptismal vows today, we will be reminded that we will continue on this journey only with God's help, and by honoring our vows to God and to each other.