

Sermon Outline
Sunday, February 28, 2020
Lent 2
Salisbury United Church
Sherwood Park, Alberta
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Some places you remember the rest of your life long after you have stopped visiting them.

In the Alberta Rockies many of you will have the memory of driving the Icefields Parkway across the spine of the Rocky Mountains.

My best memory of the Icefields Parkway is staying at the campground at the Columbia Icefields, a tenting only campsite which is so high up in the Rockies that the stars at night lie open above you like a great spangled quilt. The climb to get there, either from Banff or Jasper, along the winding Icefields Parkway, takes you past other-wise hidden mountain peaks and icy rushing streams and bluer than blue lakes all of which lie breath takingly close the ceiling of the world. It's the kind of experience that can draw you out of yourself if you let it, out of your thoughts and moods and suppositions, until you are just absorbed in it all as you experience it.

When we hear the gospel reading today as it was read by Archbishop Desmond Tutu from the Storybook Bible, we hear one story about a climb up into the mountains that three of Jesus' disciples made with Jesus. And there are so many things about what happened when they arrived at the mountaintop that made an impression on the disciples but not what you might usually expect in the mountains. First of all, there's the glow, the metamorphosis of light, that seems to surround Jesus' face and clothes. There's the guest appearance of the great figures of Jewish legend, Moses, the liberator of his people, and Elijah, the prophet who would again bodily to announce the Messiah, the second great liberator, was about to arrive. There's the babbling nonsense of the disciples, "Let make alpine huts up here so we can be here together forever." And there's the cloud of God's presence that descends on them and the holy voice from the cloud that says of Jesus, "This is my beloved, Listen to him." And there is the fear of the disciples that drives them to their knees. Any one of these on their own would be enough to overwhelm whatever there might be to see on a normal mountaintop journey. But taken altogether it is beyond magical and beyond mystical. It's in a category of its own for which there are few adequate words. Even the word "transfiguration" that we often use to give this story a title is not adequate for what is

mean to be indescribable. And therein lies the rub. Because this picture of the disciples overwhelmed by light and mystery and awe has led us to assume that the indescribable is what the most powerful spiritual experiences must be like ... if we are ever going to have them .. if they spiritual experiences are ever to be real then they must be presented in cloud and majesty and awe. The other part of the rub, is that in the end, our assumption also leads us to miss the small thing that is actually the most profound thing of all in this transfiguration story, this story of metamorphosis on the mountain top.

To be sure, there is a huge appeal to the idea that we might all strive to have mountaintop experiences in life. That we might climb up out of the world to find the God who is beyond the world. And some few of us may have those kind of experiences in the sacred heights we aspire to in the world. But that is a rarity, just like climbing mountains is not something we all really do. It's one thing to view mountain peaks from your car driving along a paved road and quite another altogether to assemble and put on your hiking gear or your cycling gear or even better your climbing harness, and take on the challenge of truly scaling the peaks of the world. The spiritual life is like that. There are few actual spiritual mountain climbers who can and do scale the supreme heights of spiritual experience in life. It is far more common for most of us to find that we live life, not from the spiritual heights, but in the ordinary sway of our comings and goings through the valleys and well trodden paths of the world. That is after all where our home really is, for the most part. Our home is where we tread the steps of life and work out the meaning of where we have to go in life with God.

Which takes me to the second things we might miss if we take the mountaintop to be our spiritual resting place. We miss the final great encounter of this transfiguration scene from our scripture reading, a final encounter which is summarized in one easy sentence. "And then, they were left alone with Jesus." You notice it did to say, once the light dimmed and the clouds withdrew, that the disciples were left alone with the peaks and vistas of the mountains, which are the sights that usually are so magnificent to behold in the mountains. No, it says that the disciples are left alone, at the last, with Jesus. And this is the final and small revelation in this story that so often gets passed over – the Jesus who remains. The disciples at the last see the face of their familiar friend, the one who knew them before they themselves met him, who called them out of their old life and welcomed them to walk with him and learn from him, the one who showed them the meaning of who God is and what God's love means for the big metamorphosis to come, the resurrection. This little moment at the end of the story is the true revelation – that it is with Jesus that they remain, not with the mountain. That while places may impress themselves upon us and even bear the memory of a brush

with the divine, it is what remains when all that is gone that matters. And what remains is the person-to-person connection they have with Jesus. And so they follow him because of that connection, and in following him they must do what people have done from the first, they go out the holy place into the garden of the world because he asks them to. And they follow him into the world because he remains with them and sees them with eyes of kindness, challenge and love.

When I was very small and we still lived in Colorado there was another drive in the Rockies that I used to look forward to. We used to drive up into the Rocky Mountains to a place known locally as Charlie Eagleplume's Trading Post. It was owned by an indigenous man who really was named Charlie Eagleplume. Part of the thrill of getting Charlie's place was getting up into the mountains, past the tumbling streams and on into the dry juniper and pine landscape higher up. The air always smelled different to me as we drove up. Sometimes you would see a real eagle riding the thermals as you came around a bend with a drop-off. But the other part of the thrill, and what I looked forward to, was actually arriving at Charlie's place, because as kid I knew that he always gave away traditional corn necklaces to every child who visited. That was more interesting to me than the beautiful indigenous art and jewellery he sold in his trading post, which was the main reason the adults went there. No for me the sense that Charlie had a soft spot for us kids, that he saw us and welcomed us, that his eyes smiled at us kindly and with interest, was the main point of the journey.

That's how it is with us too. Here in this life, in this time, in the place where life is lived, where hearts and spirits are broken by injustice and tragedy, where lives need mending the main point of the journey lies in the kindness, and challenge, and love reflected back into life by Jesus. It is here in this life where our real spiritual walk begins and ends. Mountaintops are wonderful, and I will go back to them when I can, as any child born in the mountains will. But you eventually have to come down to level ground where the God of life leads us in love.

I will end with a blessing from a song by a singer named Bebo Norman,

So walk down this mountain
With your heart held high
Follow in the footsteps of your Maker
With this love that's gone before you
And these people at your side
If you offer up your broken cup
You will taste the meaning of this life