

A Mountain of Suffering
(Matthew 17:1-9; Exodus 24:12-18)

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This coming Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the season leading to Easter. It is a season that is bracketed in the Gospel story between two “mountaintop experiences.” This Sunday we are upon the mountain top of Jesus’s transfiguration, from which Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. And the next mountaintop, will be the mount of Calvary on which he will be crucified. On both ends of Lent there is a mountain top experience; an experience that comes as close to a direct encounter with God as any mortal can ascend to.

And between these two mountaintops, the season of Lent stretches out like a valley into which we are about to descend. It is the valley of our daily lives into which we are to walk, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of the towns below. But armed the vision of a transcendent Jesus and a word that has come to us out of the heavens, “This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”

Lent is a time to focus on listening for Jesus. And because we know how good most of us are at talking, and not really listening, it may help to engage in traditional disciplines such as fasting and prayer, setting aside distractions, so that we can really reflect on our existence in the valley between the mountaintops, where we encounter such realities

as the “shadow of death.” “Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thy rod and staff shall comfort me.”

One of the interesting things about the experience of Jesus’s disciples on the Mountain of his Transfiguration is the way they respond to him. Jesus is glorious and bright in his transfiguration and major figures in the Biblical story are present with him and then one in him. And this leaves the disciples trembling in such fear that Jesus needs to touch them, reassure them and tell them to get up and let go of their fear, before he leads them down the mountain.

I find the disciple’s responses interesting because, when I imagine a mountaintop experience of being close to God, I imagine having a very different reaction. My hope would be for a reassuring and comforting experience, like being enfolded in the warmth of loving arms. I’m not so excited about an experience of fear that is so great that I can’t get up without help. That kind of disabling experience is not what I want to think of when I think of a mountaintop experience of being close to God.

The Inversion of Mountains and Valleys

One of the most powerful truths that the Gospel story expresses over and over and with many examples, is what you can call an “inversion of reality,” where everything is turned upside down. So, for example, when Jesus says “Blessed are the poor,” we think to ourselves, “Isn’t that upside down? I thought that the rich are clearly blessed and the poor are the unfortunate ones. Or when Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, he surprises us by lifting up the tax collector and condemning the pious Pharisee.

And it is Jesus who tells his disciples that to gaining one’s life requires first losing it by putting others first. Jesus makes it clear that we must be able to see things upside down in order to recognize God’s hand at work in the world.

And so we can expect that this pattern of turning things on their heads will also apply in some way to the way we understand the “mountain tops” and “valleys” in the Gospel story and in our own lives. We have to ask ourselves whether it is the mountaintops or the valleys that bring us closest to God.

Events in the Shadow of Death

If we look around us, at the hustle and bustle of life down in the valleys that contain the towns and roads in which we live, it is clear that a lot of what is happening is not what God wants for this world. God does not want us to suffer.

Most horrifying and heartbreaking in recent days is the earthquake last week on the border between Turkey and Syria. The quakes there took close to 50,000 lives. Men, women and children. We saw the rubble of flattened buildings and the suffering and tragedy is unspeakable. We are talking about more than 10 times the death toll in 9/11 in as short a space of time. A mountain of suffering! (And yet a week later, we have nearly forgotten).

If you were to imagine yourself as a reporter on the ground in Turkey, how would you cope with what you are seeing right now. What would it do to your own heart to witness so much suffering. I would hardly call it a “mountaintop experience”. I would call it an experience of being in the deepest depths of the “valley of the shadow of death”, an experience that would make it impossible to move forward without some form of divine help.

Or imagine that you are a reporter on the ground in the Ukraine today, reporting on the terrible carnage and human suffering there; a suffering made even more tragic by the fact that, unlike in Turkey, it has all been brought about by fellow human beings, with cruel and hardened hearts.

Or imagine that you are the parent of a child murdered at Sandy Hook or the relative of someone murdered in one of the countless ongoing outbursts of gun violence. How do you stand up and move on with your life without somehow being touched by divine intervention?

How did Mother Teresa get up each morning without despair, in order to care for an endless sea of starving people at her hospice in Calcutta. She lived constantly, in the valley of the shadow of death?

All of these are examples of the opposite of what we hope for as peak experiences in which we hope to meet God. And yet, can it be that God chooses to show his face and make his glory known to us not on the highest peaks, when we are farthest from the sufferings of the world below, but in the midst of those moments at the bottom of the valley, where sin and death seem most clearly to have the victory? It seems very upside down.

And yet that is how the story plays out, because when we arrive atop the Mount of Calvary at the end of Lent, we will encounter Jesus on the cross, suffering a slow and agonizing death, abandoned by all. His suffering body will be an expression of all human suffering, of all for whom he gave his life. The “mountaintop experience” at Calvary is clearly the opposite to what we want to see. On Calvary we are confronted by a “mountain of suffering.”

The Desire to Escape Suffering

I think it is only human nature for us to want our mountaintop experiences of being with God, to be as far away from any kind of suffering as possible. We often hear ourselves saying: “Please I don’t want to know about the tragedies or suffering going on around me. I’m not Jesus. I don’t have his unlimited energy to be there for everyone in their times of need. Please, I don’t want to hear about species going extinct or global warming. I don’t want to know about what is happening in the Ukraine or in Turkey, because it is too heartbreaking. I just want to climb to some kind of a mountaintop above it all, where I can escape all the suffering and pain in the town below. Let me be distracted. Let me entertain myself or just let me do whatever it takes not to have to face the mountain of suffering.

I know I feel that way a lot. And it may not be possible for us to face the suffering around us with a full awareness as Jesus did. But Lent is a time when we can do our best to listen for God to speak to us from the the mountain of suffering and death from which he has chosen to address us.

Transfiguration

So while fasting or praying or just being quiet and listening for God are important things for us all to do during the season of Lent that is about to begin, I'd like to suggest one more discipline. Take the opportunity, when you can, to allow yourself to be a little bit more present in the midst of the suffering of others, or for that matter, to be present with yourself in your own personal suffering. Rather than recoil in fear, and run from it, as I think we all do to some extent, seek to engage it with a greater openness to exploring how it makes you feel.

Be like Thomas who, when Jesus invited him to put his finger into the wounds in his hands and side, did not recoil in horror, but did what Jesus asked of him. And do so with the faith that, instead of being destroyed by what we discover we, like him, will meet and recognize God.

It seems to me fear is also a kind of suffering. And so I would think that Lent is a good season to allow ourselves to feel what we are afraid of. If we are afraid of being penniless or being alone or losing something that is important to us, we might allow ourselves to explore those feelings, trusting that God may actually signal his presence most convincingly in the very place where we expected to be most alone and abandoned.

This is a season set apart for us to learn how to live with and not run from the reality of suffering or from our fears. And this discipline is part of what I believe will replace our desire to escape with a resurrection Spirit at Easter, that really does have the victory over death.

