

In our two readings this morning we find ourselves on two mountaintops. Something very familiar to us out here. I want to begin by asking you to imagine, closing your eyes if you wish, that you are on top of a mountain. Looking out over the landscape, seeing what it reveals to you of the land that you cannot see otherwise, with its dips and its rises. As we proceed through the message this morning, I invite you to occasionally drift back to your mountaintop, envisioning what it is revealing to you.

In our Old Testament reading Moses, after a lifetime of leading his people through the dessert, ascends Mount Nebo. Moses has come to the end of himself, the end of his life which has been set between mountaintop experiences with the Lord and descending back down from the mountain to return to his people. Back to the rabble who vocalized their desire to return to the fleshpots of Egypt. Moses lived his life between incredible experiences of God's presence, and frustrating lows, which we might identify as burnt out leadership. God continually revealed Himself to Moses, before sending him back among the people. Throughout life we find ourselves in these experiences, we find ourselves in moments of clarity, seeing God's grace in our lives, hearing God's word, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. We find ourselves able to look out before us and see everything so clearly. And as much as we want to stay atop these mountains, we find ourselves descending back into the rabble of everyday life. We return to lives that feel like a never ending journey, hoping that God's grace might be revealed to us again. We come to services, hoping that the preacher who normally just babbles on will be able to speak God's word to us. We continue to pour ourselves out for others hoping to see the face of Christ again. We long for mountaintop moments.

When God first calls Moses, Moses had already left Egypt, He had allowed himself to forget the suffering of his people. Moses had built a life for himself away from the enslavement

of the Hebrews. That is until Moses climbed Mount Sinai, and the Lord who Moses did not know and could not name, spoke to him. Moses, who I am sure would have been perfectly content to live his life as a shepherd not hearing an endless stream of complaints from a flock of actual sheep, is told to bring the people to this mountain to worship the Lord. And Moses goes, because he can see a life for him and his people founded on the worship of the Lord. A life not just of freedom from enslavement and oppression but freedom to worship and enjoy their God. This is what sends Moses back to the land he fled from, away from this mountaintop, away from this revelation of God. And these are the experiences, the revelations of God, which keep sending Moses back among the rabble. It is the grace of God revealed to Moses, which allows this burnt out leader to continue to wander and love this fickle rabble of people, all the way until the end.

When the end of Moses does finally come, it comes fittingly atop another mountain. After Moses comes to the top of the mountain, the Lord shows Moses the land the people are about to enter, telling him “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying ‘I will give it to your descendants’, I have let you see it with your own eyes but you shall not cross over there”. And with that Moses, the servant of the Lord dies. Moses climbs the mountaintop to look out over the land that was about to be given to his people, envisioning the future that awaits them. But this time Moses does not get to descend from the mountaintop, to rejoin his people and rejoice over the land that God has prepared for them. Moses dies with one final revelation of God’s grace to the people, one final mountaintop experience. Moses departs from them with the vision of what lies ahead but is unable to go forward. The vision that carried Moses from his first journey upon Mount Sinai. His final mountaintop moment, comes to a bittersweet end. He will never have to descend from the mountaintop again, even if this time he wants to.

This a disappointing end for the servant of God, who tried so hard to love the rabble, to witness revelations of God's grace among his people. He is left hoping that God's grace will continue to be revealed to this people. Hoping that his people might have other mountaintop experiences, hoping that there was a point to all of his toil. But in the end Moses dies, able to see the land that lies before them, while so much is shrouded in mystery. As well as he can see the land below, so much about lies ahead remains unknown.

In our reading from Luke, we again find ourselves atop a mountain, with James, John and Peter, we climb up this mountain to see what our Lord Jesus Christ is going to show us. We ascend to the top of this mountain hoping to witness something that we could not see below. We join them awaiting what vision they were going to see, hoping for a revelation of God's grace. While they were on the mountain praying, Jesus' face changed, and His clothes became dazzling white. Jesus is transfigured, the man they knew, covered in dust, the man in poverty is not transformed, He does not become something other than who they know. But He shines with the glory of God. He shines into the lives of those who are with Him, the veil is lifted and they see something beyond just dazzling white, they see they majesty of their God, shinning into the world. On this mountaintop these three disciples are not shown a land on which all of their promises rest but are shown the grace on which their lives rest, the grace which has been ever present in Jesus, but unseen until this moment. After they witness this moment of awe inspiring transfiguration they see Moses and Elijah appear talking with Jesus. Luke does not tell us how we know their identities but somehow atop this mountain they experience this clarity. Atop this mountain they see Moses, who led their people through the wilderness and Elijah, the prophet who stood upon a mountain and heard the voice of God in the still small voice.

The text tells us that they appeared in glory, but Luke does not describe their glory as angelic, as we often picture. They are not glorified simply because they have passed on. No instead their glory is connected by Luke to their conversation with Christ about his departure in Jerusalem, about His exodus, which was about to be accomplished, which was almost at hand. Their glory, atop this mountain is in their connection to what lies below, the vision beyond the mountain. Their appearance, shines out as part of God's grace revealed, which has been ever moving towards the cross. It is what glorifies the bitter wandering of the people, it glorifies Moses' burnt out leadership, it glorifies Elijah's loneliness in the grace of the work that God was always moving to accomplish. Upon this mountaintop we see not a promised land but grace about to be poured out upon the world. Whereas Moses and Elijah often only found the glory and grace of God atop mountains, the glory of Christ is descending towards Jerusalem, it is in the lowness and darkness of the valley of death that the grace of God is about to shine out the brightest. It is atop the mountain of Golgotha that we shall all have our mountaintop experience, it is upon the hill of the skull that we shall find God's grace accomplishing our redemption. As we move through Lent beginning on Wednesday, we do not do so descending from the mountaintop experience of the transfiguration, into despair, detesting the rabble of life or the rabble within ourselves. We do not follow the disciples down the mountain, away from the grace and glory of God but towards the cross, in all of its glory, all of its grace. We follow Christ down the mountain towards the humiliation and exaltation of the cross.

The disciples come down from the mountain with mixed feelings, unsure of what to do or say to mark the occasion. Peter scrambles for something to say, offering to erect tents for each of them, missing the point. When suddenly all three are surrounded by a cloud, overshadowed and terrified, when they hear a voice saying to them, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him".

When lost for words, coming down from the mountain, the disciples are reminded that Jesus is the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, chosen and elected to be the One who is for us, the One who will die on the cross. As we come down from our mountaintop moments and we move on, we are guided by the voice of our Savior. We go down from these moments of glory and wander back among the great crowd below, towards the cross. As we descend down from the mountain, towards the rabble of Moses, or the loneliness of Elijah, we do not do so alone, we go guided by our God, in the grace which is ever shining in our lives. We move forward away from the mountaintop, away from the face of Christ which shines, knowing that the transfigured Christ is the Christ who is always with us, leading us towards our reconciliation.

And as we descend from this Sunday into Lent, we join the great crowd, asking Jesus to heal the boy. We come down from the mountaintop witnessing the grace of God shining out, to rejoin the rabble that gathers below. Along with the disciples we become part of this crowd who must admit their inability to heal, our inability to return ourselves to our Father. We move on from the transfiguration, knowing our limits, knowing where we must follow. We descend from our revelation of God's grace, examining ourselves and finding ourselves wanting, we look towards Jerusalem listening to Word of God, astounded at the greatness of God. We admit our own faithlessness, knowing our faith must be given to us by Christ. We enter Lent, not in despair and shame at our inability to return ourselves to God, but astounded by the greatness of our God. We come off the mountaintop, looking to the grace of God shining out in the cross. This is our mountaintop vision which moves us through this world, this is the vision which sustains us even as we depart, as servants of God. We continue to rest upon the mountaintop that is the greatness of God, which lifts us up from the lowliness of our despair.