

Mark 9:2-9
Transfiguration B
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Just a Glimpse
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Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

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To a crowd in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King well, said these inspiring and encouraging words:

I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.

If you've ever been to a mountaintop, you know that the view is spectacular. You can see out for miles on all sides. Everything looks small. Mountain top experiences are powerful and they put things into a different kind of perspective. This was certainly true of Dr. King's mountaintop and its bird's eye view of justice for all. And it's true in our reading from Mark's gospel.

Jesus, Peter, James, and John had gone up a mountain to pray. It shouldn't come as a surprise to us that people have always gone up mountains when they hoped to meet God. I'm guessing, though, that what happened on that mountain was not what the disciples had expected! The text says that Jesus was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white. Then, Moses, who'd led the Hebrew people out of Egypt and delivered the Ten Commandments, and Elijah, the most important of the ancient prophets, appeared on the mountain top to chat with Jesus. As the party started to break up, Peter suggested pitching tents for Jesus and his guests, then a cloud overshadowed them and a voice thundered, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And then it was over. No more cloud, no more dead patriarchs, not even any residual shine left on his robes—just Jesus, alone with his friends.

Like so many others, this is an odd story and leaves us with many questions. It's also an anticlimactic story, because nothing really seems to change when they leave the mountain. But it does mark a significant turning point in Jesus' ministry. Like the story of his baptism earlier in Luke's gospel, this tale signifies a shift in Jesus' life. The baptism story signaled the start of Jesus' public ministry and this story, the transfiguration story, marks the beginning of the end of that ministry. Jesus turns toward Jerusalem, toward the cross. And, during the season of Lent that begins on Wednesday, we follow him.

Mountaintop experiences are powerful and they certainly change our perspectives, don't they? The worst part of a mountaintop experience, though, is coming back down. When I was in high school, I sought out those kinds of spiritual mountaintop experiences. Every December after

Christmas, I and thousands of other youths flocked to the convention center in Peoria for two days of Christian Rock music, heart-rending testimonies, and dramatic preaching. As hundreds of kids streamed into the aisles to make personal commitments of faith, I got all caught up in the emotion of the whole thing and inevitably found myself in the long train of teens moving forward. It was emotional, it was exhausting, it was a mountaintop experience.

Every summer I went to Greenville College for a week of intensive Christian instruction, spirited praise and worship, and more dramatic preaching, and emotionally charged calls to repentance and rededication. It was a mountaintop experience. But the worst thing about mountaintop experiences is coming back down. Leaving the friends I'd made, the spiritually electric times of praise and prayer, the bubble of safety, security, and ecstasy, and going back "into the world" to live out my new commitments. Or not, and I'd beat myself up for not living them well enough. I'd go to church, but it just didn't recreate the spiritual high of the mountaintop and I'd muck along in the valley until the next mountain came along.

The truth is, though, life isn't meant to be lived from mountaintop to mountaintop; it's meant to be lived down in the valleys. As good as mountaintop experiences are – whether it's the high of getting an amazing grade, or landing a date with that special someone, or getting a promotion, or an amazing trip, or the birth of a child, or a profound spiritual experience – as good as mountaintop experiences are, real life is lived in the valleys. But that's okay, because even just a glimpse at the mountaintop gives us something to fall back on, something to be encouraged by, something to light the valley path before us where *real life* happens.

Dr. King never got to live in the promised land of his vision. But, according to him, seeing it was enough to persist in pursuing it. Peter and James and John never got to live in the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus so often preached about, taught about, and performed signs to

illustrate. But, they did get a glimpse of him transformed, when time seemed to stop, and light dazzled, and the old and the very old shared space with the present to cast a vision of the future. And the three of them never stopped working toward that future.

Life isn't meant to be lived from mountaintop to mountaintop; it's meant to be lived down in the valleys. May the glimpses we catch from the mountaintops of our own lives sustain us as we live day to day in the valleys. Amen.