

*From End to Exodus*  
Luke 9:28-36  
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What an amazing and amazingly confusing story this morning's text tells! The story of the transfiguration is told in all three of the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Every year at this time we encounter one of those three versions. The whole scene has a surreal quality to it. It starts in a very ordinary way. Jesus takes the three disciples who are leaders of sorts – Peter, James and John – and goes up onto the mountain to pray. The disciples are sleepy – probably dozing while Jesus prayed. We are told that in the midst of prayer Jesus' face changed to another appearance – the Greek says, “his face became other,” which is in itself an odd statement. His robes become dazzling white. The disciples are startled to full wakefulness to momentarily see Jesus talking to the long dead Moses and Elijah before those two Old Testament figures vanish. The three have been discussing Jesus' departure that he is about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Seeing the three together, Peter suggests to Jesus that he put up tents – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah – just as Moses and Elijah are leaving. To cap it all off the disciples who were just startled awake by dazzling bright light are suddenly engulfed in a cloud. The text tells us that they were “terrified as they entered the cloud.” Well, that's sensible. Who wouldn't be? The scene reminded me of that moment of dark we experience as we enter a “fun house” – that point when you know something is going to jump out at you, but nothing has yet and you can't really see at all. Then a voice in the cloud: This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him. That end of the scene is reminiscent of Jesus' baptism when a voice from heaven also proclaimed “This is my son...”

In order to begin to understand this odd text, we have to back up a bit. What exactly is God admonishing the disciples to listen to? The text just preceding this mountain top experience recounts one of the times when Jesus forecast his own suffering and death. Jesus had said to his disciples, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Jesus had then gone on to admonish his followers about what the 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “the cost of discipleship.” All who are to stick with Jesus will, like Jesus, have to take up the cross. We can recall here that both of these messages – that Jesus would suffer and die and that true discipleship is a life threatening activity – both those messages were consistently difficult for the disciples to hear. God is affirming that what Jesus has said is the way that it is. Listen to him. God is affirming the truth of Jesus' message. Jesus is headed for the cross. His glory is the glory of God on the mountaintop, not the glory of an earthly throne in Jerusalem.

Peter, James, and John had what some would call a ‘mountain top experience.’ It was amazing, scary, electrifying and, at least for Peter, something that he did not want to end. That is a feeling we can relate to. Mountain top experiences come in many forms, but we all have had them at times in our lives. Some such experiences are moments of deepening faith – times when we feel close to Jesus in a way we never have, times when we feel that God has spoken directly to us or times when we suddenly know our belief with new clarity. Some mountaintop experiences have to do with ordinary life events which are in some way extraordinary – a graduation, winning an award, falling in love, a wedding, getting pregnant, becoming parents or grandparents. For a brief time we are caught up in elation, euphoria, a sense that we have stepped into a special little bubble where the mundane concerns of life are pushed aside. We ride high

floating on that special feeling. The author Helen Keller became blind and deaf as a toddler after an infection. As a growing child, Helen struggled to grasp the concept of language. She shared her experience in her book "The Miracle Worker," which became a movie of the same name. As she tells it, at first young Helen could make no sense of the letters her teacher incessantly spelled into her hands. Then the world opened up to her. She described her mountain top experience this way: "We walked down the path to the well house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten--a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away."<sup>1</sup> While Helen Keller certainly had a unique mountain top experience, the feelings are the same – a sense of awakening, light, hope, joy, liberation, newness. That is what we experience in those wonderful times. Yet Ms. Keller also states another truth about mountain top experiences. She says, "There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away." She could not just dwell in the euphoria. There was still work to be done. Mountain top experiences do not last. No matter how wonderful, they are not meant to be permanent states. They are places we go in life from time to time – wonderful, but temporary.

Sometimes God's creation gives us fleeting mountain top experiences. I especially like autumn - being a lover of bright color. For a few years of my adult life I went around trying to take pictures of the most beautiful of the fall foliage. But then I realized that the photos never really captured the beauty. I realized that I had to enjoy the brief beauty each year and then let go of it. Every year the wonderful bright orange and magenta and yellow and red gives us a lift before the bleak gray winter. It helps to carry us through, but we can't hold onto it. So it is with mountain top experiences. They feel wonderful in the moment. They give us a lift to carry us in life. But as much as we'd like to hold onto them we can't because life is really in the valleys. And life in the valleys can be tough.

For years after my mother died, my Dad faithfully called me on my birthday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>. Usually the call was a follow-up to his flowery card which arrived in the snail mail. Then one year the day came and went. There was no card. There was no call. A week later on August 9<sup>th</sup>, the phone rang. Although by that time I was not expecting his call, I was not entirely surprised to hear Dad's voice say, "Anne, I forgot your birthday. Happy Birthday!" As we chatted, Dad told me of the plans for a couple of weeks at the Jersey shore. During that period Dad would rent a house. My two brothers and sisters-in-law along with Dad's 7 grandchildren would all pile in, though not all of them stayed the full time. The vacation was to begin the next day, so I reminded Dad that the next day, August 10<sup>th</sup>, was the birthday of not one, but two of his granddaughters. My younger brother's two oldest, Carolyn and Eileen, were born on the same day two years apart. So, Dad told me that he would hold a pencil while we finished our conversation. The idea was that he would remember to write himself a note when he got off the phone. We talked a while longer. As we were about to hang up, I said to him, "Now, Dad, don't forget Carolyn and Eileen's birthday is tomorrow." He said, "Ok." Then there was a pause after

which in a puzzled voice he asked, “Then, whose birthday did I forget?” Although I have chuckled over that conversation many times, it was but one of many small moments which reminded me that my Dad was drifting off into dementia; that he was leaving us piece by agonizing piece as we experienced what I like to call “glacial grief.” That is a rough piece in the valleys of life that all too many can relate to these days.

The rough place is far different for the church secretary from one of my churches. “Marsha” had had breast cancer and a radical mastectomy a few years before I arrived. When the cancer recurred on the other side, we walked together through her second surgery and round of chemo. A couple of years later, “Marsha” began to notice strange bruises on her arms and legs. It was leukemia. She endured chemo yet again. Currently, she is in remission. That is her tough valley. Although the details are all different, who among us does not have a difficult valley to traverse? Many of us have been short of money at times, some of us too often. We have loved ones who are ill or in pain, family members who keep coming round looking for handouts or shelter, others that we worry about because they can’t seem to get it together or they drink too much or they are in a dangerous line of work or lack direction all together. Who wouldn’t want to cling to the mountain top experience of joy, light, or euphoria when it comes around?

As much as Peter wanted to hold onto that experience of Jesus in his glory, as much as he wanted to stay right there and not come down off the mountain, God had other plans. The voice of God points both back to what Jesus has said about his coming suffering - and ours - and forward to the crucifixion. In the conversation with Moses and Elijah, Jesus is discussing his departure, which he is about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now that’s a funny way to talk about getting yourself executed, isn’t it? The text describes Jesus’ death, not as death, not as something done to him, but as ‘departure’ – the Greek word here is actually “exodus” - and says he is about “to *accomplish it.*” The transfiguration has affirmed the divinity of Jesus. It has shown forth however fleetingly something of his coming glory. For Peter and James and John, what they witnessed will not be fully understood until after the resurrection. For Jesus himself, as at his baptism, it is affirmation of his path. The experience of the glory to come may also have fortified him for the horrible road ahead.

That’s the thing about mountain top experiences. They always affirm where we are by giving us positive feedback – whether a diploma or an award that tells us we have done well, or an experience of God that affirms us in our faith. But as was true for the disciples and Jesus, mountain top experiences are moments of solitariness. Have you ever noticed how on the "mountain tops" of life we seem to be alone as all around us disappears in the "glory" of the moment? In those moments of intense experience, of euphoria, we are set apart from the crowd, but mostly we are set apart from the stuff of day-to-day life. As human beings and as Christians, we live among people, in community. So having been nourished for the journey ahead, we always come down off the mountain to rejoin the community. Whether we have a renewed sense of purpose or a new sense of direction or a sense of a new direction or have simply been affirmed to continue along our path, those mountain top experiences are part of what enables us to keep going, to set our faces towards our Jerusalem and our Calvary, to march on along the path of our lives.

When he came down from the mountain, having experienced his glory, Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem. He marched onward toward his death. He set out to accomplish his departure.

Jesus led the way. Because of him, death is no longer an end point, but an exodus. In the scriptures 'exodus' means much more than 'exit.' The exodus of the Old Testament is the wonderful story of God's liberation of God's people from slavery. That is the message that today's text intends to communicate about Jesus' death. On the cross a new exodus began. As Moses had led the chosen people out of Egypt, so Jesus turned death which was an end into exodus which is a beginning.

Although we Christians profess faith in eternal life, it is difficult for us to think of death as a beginning. We approach death with sadness, grief, and fear. But we are the ones who have not died. That sounds funny and obvious, doesn't it? We are the ones who have not died. What I mean by that is that the living have experienced death only as the moment of loss that it is from the valleys in which we live.

As a loved one is dying, we are acutely aware of the coming separation. We try to imagine the life we shared with them devoid of them. We wonder who we will laugh with, who will hold us when we are scared, who will make us tea when we are sick. We worry whether we can manage the finances, how we will get the snow cleared, whether we will rattle around in the house all by ourselves. We know that there will be a big hole that no one and no thing can fill. We feel lost even before the loss finally occurs.

For those who must go on living, death is frightening. Most of us to one extent or another fear the unknown. While we have certain beliefs that we cling to, deep down we know that everything that we think about what happens after death is a mix of faith and speculation. It is frightening.

But all of that is usually not the experience of the dying themselves. While those for whom dying is a process certainly experience grief and sadness, have you ever noticed how consistently the dying make peace with their experience in the end? Through my nursing career and time as a pastor, I have been present for numerous deaths ranging the whole gamut from children to the very old. Ultimately, most are ready to go when the time comes. They seem to truly experience their own death as, in the words of a quaint old euphemism, "crossing over." While the wording is outdated, that is in a way what the text is telling us today. Jesus set out to convert death from end to exodus. Confirmed in his glory, Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. Jesus set out to accomplish the end of his journey so that our journeys would end not in the bondage of death but in the exodus that is liberation. Our mountain top experiences fortify us for the journey and give us courage to go on. But they are but a foretaste of the ultimate mountain top experience, which will come after our exodus when we too experience ultimate liberation in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Keller, Helen. *The Story of My Life*. Doubleday, Page & Co., 1903