“A Mountain-Top Experience”
Matthew 17:1-9
Series: TripAdvisor – Week 3. Experiential Discipleship
The Rev. Douglas C. Hoglund
The Woodside Church
May 4, 2014

During the Christmas break some years ago my family journeyed to Stowe, Vermont for a week of skiing. The village is perched on the side of Mount Mansfield. At 4,393 feet above sea level, Mount Mansfield is the highest point in the very mountainous Green Mountain State. It’s a long way up on the chair lift. On this particular day the clouds shrouded the mountain making it a rather gloomy, chilly ride. Yet when the lift deposited us at the peak there was a completely different vista. We were above the clouds. I squinted in the dazzling sun and gazed out over an endless field of white stretching to the horizon in every direction. It hurt my eyes to be in such brilliance. As I took in the glorious sight, a father and his son jumped off the lift behind me. I could tell the little guy was just as awestruck. He looked around at the clouds in wonder and said, “Wow. Dad, is this heaven?”

That would have been a very long chair lift.

Jesus took three of his disciples up a very high mountain. I believe it was Mount Hermon – the highest peak in the Holy Land. At over 9,000 feet it is more than twice as high as Mount Mansfield. Often snowcapped, Mount Hermon is home to the only ski resort in Israel. In the thin air on that peak, Peter, James and John received a vision, a taste, a touch of heaven. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each tell the story of the Transfiguration. It is a crucial turning point in the Gospel story. Just before this scene Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus confirms this and gives the first prediction of his coming crucifixion and resurrection. That is the end of his three year ministry in Galilee. After the Transfiguration, Jesus begins his final and fateful journey to Jerusalem and the Cross. So if Jesus’ baptism is the beginning of his ministry and his crucifixion and resurrection are the end of his ministry, the Transfiguration is the middle, the high point, the turning point in his ministry. Alone, with his three closest disciples, Jesus has a mountain-top experience. Before he begins the dreadful march to Calvary, Jesus, in a sense, calls home.

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. (Matthew 17:1-3)

I was blinded by the sun and clouds on the top of Mount Mansfield. Peter, James and John saw a more blinding light in the face of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark adds, “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them” (Mark 9:3). Sounds like a commercial for Tide. The disciples were shocked to see Moses and Elijah but when they were enveloped by the bright cloud they didn’t say, “Wow”
they said “Woe” and “Oy Vey” which is “Woe is me!” For the three disciples it is a total, overwhelming, multi-sensory experience.

In our message series TripAdviser we examine the ways Jesus advises us on the trip or road of our lives. He wants to give us to the truth on the go. Throughout the history of the Church, there are five ways or roads the Holy Spirit uses to speak to us, to shape us, to make us more like Jesus. The Spirit also uses these roads to help us drop the baggage we are lugging along and live a life that is free. Some of these “sacred roads” you may already be using. Last week Gloria spoke about the Relationship road. You may have grown deeper and closer to Jesus through key relationships in your life: a parent or youth leader or pastor or friend that led you to Christ, the people in your Growth Group or the Alpha course, a Christian mentor or accountability partner. When the Church was first born they didn’t have buildings, clergy, or denominations. All they had were relationships. The Relationship road is the first way Jesus advises his disciples and it continues to this day.

When the Roman Empire became Christian, when it stopped persecuting the faith and started preaching it, the second road became popular: the Experiential Road. Now every city, town and village had a sanctuary. Worship services in church buildings became a multisensory experience of God. There were candles, incense, icons and images, stained glass, music, and soaring architecture. In the Middle Ages the majority could not read. Bible stories and Christian beliefs were communicated through the artwork which graced the walls of these sanctuaries.

Just as He teaches us through relationships, Jesus also speaks through our experiences. God is the one who gives us the ability to experience the wonder of the world around us. There was an international contest a few years ago to pick the Seven Wonders of the modern world. One wise teacher asked her students to cast their votes. They selected some great choices such as the Panama Canal, the Empire State Building, the Internet. While gathering the votes, the teacher noted one student didn’t turn in her paper. She asked, “Are you having trouble with your list?” The girl replied, “Yes, a little. I couldn’t quite make up my mind because there are so many.” The teacher said, “Well, tell us what you have, and maybe we can help.” The girl hesitated, then read, “I think the Seven Wonders of the World are: 1. To See 2. To Hear 3. To Touch 4. To Taste 5. To Smell 6. To Laugh 7. To Love. God gives us our senses and He communicates with us through them. We live in a very multimedia, multisensory world. In our worship services we even use pictures and screens because they are the stained glass of our time.

What is a time when you felt close to God, when you sensed his presence? Chances are that memory involves something sensory. It might literally be a mountain-top experience. Perhaps you felt the Lord while walking on a sandy beach with the sound of the pounding surf. Maybe it was a moonless night underneath a star-saturated sky or a glorious sunrise or sunset that paints the heavens with fiery hues. There are many ways to experience God’s presence: on a retreat, during a worship service, a prayer service, on a mission trip, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Now when we use the Experiential path
to drop our baggage and grow closer to Jesus there are few things to keep in mind on this sacred road.

**God Can Speak Through All Experiences.** Heather Zempel, author of the Sacred Roads study guide says,

Jesus was relational in His training of the 12 disciples (he hung out with them and rubbed off on them) but He also gave them experiences. Whether telling a story or working a miracle, Jesus consistently invited people into spiritual growth experiences along the way (at parties, on fishing expeditions, on road trips, while paying taxes).

Jesus uses every moment to teach a message. He uses a little boy’s lunch to feed thousands. He uses mud to open blind eyes. He uses interruptions – as when a paralyzed man came crashing through a ceiling - to perform a healing. He uses seeds and lamps to teach truths. He even washes stinky fishermen’s feet to make a point – talk about a sensory experience! A few minutes ago I asked you to think about a time you felt especially close to God. For you that might have been a mountain-top experience – a once in a lifetime glimpse of God’s glory. It might be as powerful for you as the Transfiguration on the mountain-top. The road of your life might be marked by a few glorious mountain-top experiences. But please don’t assume that those are the only times Jesus is speaking to you through your experiences. It’s kind of like the family picture album. If you open most of our picture albums you’ll see the highlights of our lives – Christmas, Easter, vacations, birthdays, weddings, family reunions. Those special times are wonderful. They give us lots of memories. They shape us and make us who we are. Yet there is a lot of living in between all those highlights. The ordinary every day experiences that don’t make it into the albums shape us and make us even more.

Why is this important? I sense that a lot of believers wish they could have more Wow moments with God. They may seek out mountain-top experiences because they feel those times on the mountain will make them a stronger, deeper believer. There was only one brief moment of mountain-top glory in the three years of Jesus’ ministry. But Jesus taught the disciples every day in those three years. Every day, I encourage you to ask God, “What are you saying to me through this experience?” The truth is God is speaking to us through both peaceful and painful experiences. Waiting in line teaches us to be patient. Difficult people teach us to be gracious. Boastful people teach us to be humble. Struggles and suffering teach us to rely more on God. The Lord doesn’t necessarily send these. But he can speak through all of them.

Did you know Peter, James and John almost slept through the Transfiguration. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem. Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. (Luke 9:30-32)
You may remember another time when these same three disciples were very sleepy. It was not on a dazzlingly bright mountain-top. It was in a dark, dreadful valley in Jerusalem just moments before Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. God was there in both places. Are you on a dark road right now? God is speaking to you through this experience. What is He saying? What does He want you to learn? What does He want you to do?

The fact that God uses all experiences teaches us another important lesson: Experiences are Windows – Don’t Worship Them. God can speak to us through His creation. Oswald Chambers, the author of the popular devotional book My Utmost for His Highest writes,

Nature to a saint is sacramental. If we are children of God, we have a tremendous treasure in Nature. In every wind that blows, in every night and day of the year, in every sign of the sky, in every blossoming and in every withering of the earth, there is a real coming of God to us if we will simply use our starved imagination to realize it (February 10th).

Like a stained glass window that lets the light through, God’s light shines through His creation and all our experiences. The danger comes when the experience stops being a window because we start to worship it. This is the problem with the New Age Movement. They worship the creation instead of the Creator. There’s really nothing new about that. People have worshiped idols – part of the creation instead of the Creator – since Bible times. Christians make this mistake when they think every experience is from God. Some say, “If I feel this way it must be true. It must be what God wants.” The devil can manipulate us through our experiences. What’s the best way to be sure God is speaking through your experience? Compare it with Scripture. The Holy Spirit doesn’t contradict the Word. Of all the Old Testament heroes, why did God send Moses and Elijah? They represented the two major parts of the Old Testament Scriptures – the Law and the Prophets. Jesus, Moses and Elijah are the three main figures of the whole Bible. If you ever are in doubt about whether God is speaking through an experience, see if it lines up with God’s Word.

Third, Don’t Camp on the Mountain-Top. Carry the Message.
As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, “Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what he was saying.) (Luke 9:33)

Isn’t that just like Peter – doesn’t know what to say so he says something? Usually it’s something he later regrets. Yet who can blame him? Who wouldn’t want to camp out and enjoy the glory? Who wouldn’t want to hang out in heaven for a while? Forget about all the boredom and back-breaking work down below. Jesus, however, won’t let us stay on the mountain-top. He gives us these glorious experiences to prepare us for our next mission down in the valley. Jesus and the three disciples descended from the brilliant glory of the mountain-top into a valley of frustration, failure and fighting. The other nine disciples are swept up in an argument with Pharisees. The disciples failed to drive a demon out a boy. Imagine leaving the beauty, glory and serenity of heaven and
immediately stepping into a fire-storm of controversy. And this was only the first step on the road that ends at Gethsemane and Golgotha.

If God gives you a mountaintop experience, He doesn’t want you to camp out there. He wants you to carry the experience with you. Remember His power and peace as you face whatever challenges await you in the valley. I remember a mountaintop experience when I was an Associate Pastor at Lenape Valley Church in New Britain. I just finished a three hour worship service with my youth group. It was the end of one of the best mission trips ever. We accomplished great work. The group bonded without any conflicts or pranks. Everyone truly felt the power of the Spirit. I wanted to make it last. But just after the worship service, I called home and my wife Lisa told me I received a call from a church in Yardley, Pennsylvania inviting me to interview to be their pastor. All my years at that church prepared me for the even more wonderful experiences Jesus wanted to teach me as your pastor.

And that’s why the most important lesson about experiences comes as the end of this story.

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell facedown to the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.” When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. (Matthew 17:5-8)

Listen to Jesus. That is what God the Father tells us to do. Jesus is with you always. Jesus is touching you. Jesus is speaking to you through every experience. The question is: are you listening?

- Burdened for doubt? Listen to Him.
- Weighed down by worry? Listen to Him.
- Paralyzed by fear? Listen to Him.
- Chained by addiction? Listen to Him.
- Frustrated by your finances? Listen to Him.
- Aching with loneliness? Listen to Him.
- Struggling with a loved one? Listen to Him.
- Scared by a disease? Listen to Him.
- Grieving a loss? Listen to Him.

Every day, stop and say, “Jesus, what are you saying to me through this experience?” Then, on the mundane and sometimes dark roads through the valley of life you might catch a glimpse of God’s glory and say to God, your Father, “Dad, is this heaven?”