

Listen to Him!

February 22, 2009 Last Sunday after Epiphany / Transfiguration

Lectionary citations

2 Kings 2:1-12

Psalm 50:1-6

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

Mark 9:2-9

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, when I was growing up, there was a great deal of interest in spirituality, especially in what were called “peak” experiences and so-called “higher states of consciousness.” The psychologist Abraham Maslow coined the term “peak experience.”

Peak experiences are sudden feelings of intense happiness and well-being, possibly the awareness of an “ultimate truth” and the unity of all things ... the experience fills the individual with wonder and awe....he feels at one with the world, and is pleased with itThey are moments when you feel more at one with yourself and the world, more integrated. You feel happy, even ecstatic, interconnected and in harmony.

Maslow argued that peak experiences were common to all religious traditions. He also argued that peak experiences have a lasting positive impact on a person's daily life. Maslow believed that peak experiences were unpredictable and uncontrollable. However, many of those who took up this concept deliberately sought out such experiences, in many cases by taking hallucinogenic drugs. Others more prudently sought their mountaintop experiences in nature and in spiritual disciplines such as meditation. I was recently talking to a member of our congregation who fondly remembered the Sunday mornings when she skipped church to go fishing. Although she missed church, she felt very close to God out there on the lake. Of course, some go to extremes to seek out mountaintop experiences. This same woman mentioned a young relative who feels closest to God when skydiving at sunrise. Currently, I prefer the simple peace that comes from a quiet walk in the woods!

I feel that Maslow's effort to identify a universal spiritual experience common to all religions was a well-intentioned but misguided attempt to reduce religion to lowest common denominator. Christians do have peak spiritual experiences. However, they are fundamentally different from the experiences are that of which Maslow was talking. Let me call them or “mountaintop” experiences. Today's Gospel is definitely about a mountaintop experience. However, what is missing from Maslow's peak experience, but is always present in a Christian mountaintop experience is the experience of a heightened or intensified relationship with God.

Maslow argued that the core of religious experience is totally private and personal. Peak experiences come from within, even if they are triggered by something outside of us, like a beautiful sunset. By contrast, Christian peak experience come from what is called a theophany—the self-revelation of God to

his creation. In a Christian spiritual experience, the connection is not with nature, or the world, or with the universe. The connection is with one of the persons of the Trinity; Father, Son, or Holy Ghost. This is what distinguishes a Christian mountaintop experience from just “getting high on life.”

There is a key phrase in today's Gospel that marks description of any Christian mountaintop experience, and that is a key phrase that we may not feel very comfortable: “He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.” One of the common things about the experience of God in both the Old and New Testaments is this element of fear. It is more than just being in awe at the majesty of creation—it is being in direct relationship with the creator. The fear of God involves worshiping the Lord with deep respect and devotion. It implies obedience, love, and trust. Fear of God is the foundation of all spiritual wisdom:

Indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 2: 3-5).

Peak experiences can be addictive. They are enjoyable and people, especially those with addictive personalities, tend to seek them out. The problem is, after a while, higher doses of stronger drugs, more extreme spiritual disciplines, and heights that are more spectacular are required to trigger that peak feeling. Those who are addicted to peak experiences may end up overdosing, fasting to death, or falling off a cliff, in search of that spiritual high.

Christian mountaintop experiences are more unsettling than addictive. Peter is frightened; he does not know what to say. He makes a strange suggestion that they celebrate Sukkoth, the “Festival of Booths” a harvest festival where Israelites commemorate the 40 years of living in tents in the desert by living in temporary shelters in their backyards. One suggestion is that Peter is feeling that he is already in the Kingdom of God, and he naturally wants to stay there. Yet there is no indication that Peter spent the rest of his life trying to get back to the mountain.

Jesus had a clear purpose in mind then he took Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain. This experience is called a transfiguration—a change in form or appearance, a metamorphosis—because they saw Jesus in a new light. They saw Jesus as equal to the great lawgiver, Moses, and the great prophet, Elijah. When Jesus was baptized, he heard the voice of his Father, saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” On the mountaintop, the same voice told the disciples, “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” After they heard this voice, they were left alone with Jesus.

A transfiguration is also a spiritual change. This mountaintop experience was the beginning of the transfiguration not of Jesus, but of the disciples. They had a spiritual experience on the mountaintop, but its meaning would not be clear to them until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. What they needed to listen to, and what they would and could not hear was that, as Jesus says later in this same chapter.

"The Son of Man is going to be delivered over to human hands. He will be killed, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it." (Mark 9:30b-32)

The crucial thing about Christian mountaintop experiences is not that they create a good buzz, which makes daily life seem a little brighter. Instead, the mountaintop experience, the fear of God, helps us to listen and to obey. Jesus did not need to glorified or exalted on the mountaintop. Jesus and the Father were already one. What Jesus wanted to do was to give Peter, James and John, and us, a glimpse of who he was, is, and would always be. Jesus gave them a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, where he already was in his glory. He did this so they would be transformed and be able to listen to and understand the things he had been saying to them all along.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul? Or what can you give in exchange for your soul? If any of you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of you when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." (Mark 8:34b-38)

We too need to be transformed so that we can listen to and understand, and live by these simple but challenging words. We can do this not by our own powers, but by the transforming grace of God. It is that grace that shone on them on the mountain in the beautiful face of Jesus. Today's Epistle, written by Paul who was not on that mountain, but who experienced that same light on the road to Damascus puts it very well.

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

The Pastoral Letter, 2 Peter shows that Peter and the church carried the transfiguration with them, not as a spiritual high, but as a reminder of the need to listen to God—Father, Son, & Holy Spirit—in the Word of God, the Word made flesh to us in the person and shining face of our savior Jesus Christ.

For we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. He received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. (2 Peter: 16-19)

Amen.

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