

Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

“Do not be afraid”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

All of us have had and need mountaintop experiences in our lives. Such moments may actually be on mountaintops as we are captivated by a view, allowing us to see ourselves in a profoundly new way as part of God’s creation. Other mountaintop experiences may be moments in which we see our ourselves and others in new ways: mentoring and teaching another, overcoming illness, visiting someone who is sick, or a shared conversation over a meal. Mountaintop moments may also happen in church during worship or in the quiet of prayer. In such moments, we experience God, realizing again, that reality makes sense and my life has purpose and meaning for others.

This was also the experience of Peter, James, and John on the holy mountain when they saw Jesus’ transfigured before them, his face shining like the sun and his clothes dazzling white. Jesus in that moment became divine light, the reality of God. The disciples were at first overcome with awe, wanting “the moment” to last forever; then they were overcome with fear realizing they were standing in the presence of God. Jesus came and touched them, saying, “*Get up and do not be afraid.*”

In a brief moment, the disciples had experienced the fullness of time and eternity; they had experienced the light of grace, yet they could not yet fully understand this experience. The disciples then came down the mountain with Jesus, who told them not to talk about what they had seen until they had experienced his resurrection. I think Jesus said this because, without the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit, it would have been impossible for them to believe and to proclaim the good news of this transformative experience.

At times in our lives, God may seem far away and our lives may seem a bit empty or we may feel useless. Mountaintop experiences come to us as grace, drawing us into the light of God’s reality, giving us hope, strength and a renewed vision for living. Human life is a continual ascending to and descending from holy experiences – from one holy mountaintop to another.

The psalms repeatedly speak of faith and holy mountaintops. Psalm 121, for example, reads, “*I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*” Psalm 2, appointed for today, reads, “*I have anointed my king upon Zion, my holy mountain.*” Mountaintops are places we look to for grace; they are the moments

where God crowns us with wisdom, hope, and a vision for living in God's reality.

So, it was natural that Moses also climbed Mount Sinai to encounter God. The reading from Exodus tells us that "*the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and covered it for six days.*" Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain for forty days. Imagine climbing a mountain covered by a thick cloud or fog and not being able to see. Imagine, step by step leaving a world of sight and understanding, only to enter more and more a place of darkness and unknowing. It has been said that Moses was walking by faith and not by sight.

God covered the mountain in a cloud so that Moses had to walk by faith. God covered the mountain in darkness, making Moses negate his prior plans, his prior understanding and hopes, so that God's grace might lead and renew him. On the mountaintop, Moses had to abandon himself into the reality of God. The journey with God is not a search for knowledge about God, as if God were an object of research; rather, the journey with God is about experiencing union with God. This happens when we abandon ourselves to God's grace.

We struggle to share our moments of grace with others, saying, "You should have been there!" Such moments offer us hope and give us energy to proceed in life because we have glimpsed, if even for a moment, the reality and glory of God. Such moments can come in worship, in prayer, in working in the garden, in conversation, at the sickbed of a loved one, or in receiving the help of another, of being prayed for, or in the grace offered by a complete stranger.

In the epistle reading, Peter urged his readers to believe the voice he heard on the mountaintop, recounting how God said, "*This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" Peter was not only saying "You should have been there," he was also saying, "You can also experience this when Christ, the morning star, rises in your heart." When Peter wrote, "*You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and morning star rises in your hearts,*" he was encouraging us to expect the grace of God's reality in our lives.

This is grace that overcomes the fears of our hearts – those moments when we, like Moses, feel as if we are climbing a mountain in deep fog. Who hasn't been woken in the night to that liminal moment and place when we feel God's presence and we are given hope and insight into ourselves and our struggles. At such moments, the time and eternity of God dwell in us, driving out fear, giving hope and a renewed vision for living. This is the morning star, the risen Christ dwelling in you and saying, "*Get up and do not be afraid.*"

It is crucial that we also notice that the disciples could not stay on the mountaintop. Jesus, who

had led them up the mountain, also led them back into the everyday. Like them, we also travel from experiences of God's reality, clinging to liminal moments of time and eternity – of grace – as we, led by Jesus, return to the everyday.

Jesus had to walk down from the mountain to face the cross and the life-giving resurrection of Easter morning. Over and over, our lives mirror this journey of Jesus and the disciples, as we experience the light of grace dawning in our hearts and helping us below the mountain in our own sufferings. Abandoning ourselves to grace, we die to ourselves so that we might live raised with Christ in the everyday of life.

This week, we begin the Lenten journey of the Forty Days. On Ash Wednesday, we will again experience grace in the words, "You are dust and to dust you will return." Lent is about abandoning ourselves into God's grace and experiencing union with God. For this brief forty days of Lent, we can also spend time on the mountaintop of God, letting go of our fears and allowing the morning star of Christ to lead us in life's darkness.

Walk with Jesus and walk with others. You have been given light and renewed with grace for a purpose – to walk alongside of others in their fears, anxiety and darkness.

Jesus says, "*Get up and do not be afraid.*" Each week we leave this holy mountaintop, this holy space, to walk with others in their everyday moments of fear and trembling.

Through you, Jesus will say to others, "*Do not be afraid.*" As you walk with and help your neighbor, Christ's light will cast out fear in you and in others.

Your life matters, because you reveal Jesus to others.

*Do not be afraid.* Amen.