

Today is what the church calls Transfiguration Sunday. I tried to research it, and I have the opinion that this story in the Bible, of Jesus’ transfiguration, is where we get the expression “mountaintop experience.”

And what an experience it must have been for Peter, and James, and John! They went up a mountain with Jesus, and saw him in all his shining, divine glory. They got to see him talking with Moses and Elijah, the great heroes of their Jewish faith. Moses was the great law-giver, associated with the Ten Commandments, and Elijah was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, those who spoke directly for God.

For Jesus, their leader, their teacher, their dear friend to be speaking with Moses and Elijah, long-since dead heroes? Amazing!

Peter and James and John were absolutely stunned. Other versions of the Bible are not so easy, those versions use the word “terrified.”

So Peter almost shattered the moment with his babbling: Let’s build some memorials! In other versions it’s tents, or tabernacles. In fact, in a more modern retelling of the story, it’s “Too bad we don’t have a camera with us!” Peter didn’t know what he was even saying!

However, God stepped in and spoke, through a cloud: “This is my Beloved Son, listen to him.”

Then, it was all over, they were going back down the mountain, and Jesus was telling them to keep it to themselves until he (Jesus) had risen from the dead.

Whoa—what an experience. And Jesus had arranged for these three key disciples to be there, to witness it all. If he hadn’t, we probably wouldn’t have this story in the Bible. But we do, in the gospel of Matthew and Mark and Luke.

One meaning of all this, for the three disciples and for us, is that Jesus is in partnership with all that God had been doing all along, in the Old Testament; God’s laws and the words of God’s prophets came to fulfillment through Jesus.

This is no small thing. Jesus, God’s Son, the perfect, all-loving, good person, shows us what God is hoping for us—that through the Ten Commandments and the prophets’ calls to have mercy and justice, there is happiness and goodness and righteousness, and the world and our lives will be the way God wants them to be.

This experience was a great gift to Peter and James and John. It was their mountaintop experience—literally and figuratively. It seems that Jesus provided

this experience for them. He arranged for them to come and witness all this. God even “reinforced” the experience, you might say, by speaking out loud, which was not that common even back in the days of the Bible.

I believe that this mountaintop experience was meant to help Peter and James and John. It was to inspire them, and instruct them about Jesus truly being God’s Son, sent to save the world through love. It was meant to equip them and carry them through their lives, especially after Jesus’ death and Resurrection, as they spread God’s Word.

The computer resource I looked at put it this way: “one moment of glory, a lifetime of service.” Maybe so. But what a grand and very glorious moment it was!

I think that all of us have mountaintop experiences. I think God provides them for us, to carry us through the ordinary times, and the discouraging times, and the downright bad times of our lives.

Mountaintop experiences are very special, and they are gifts from God. There are some mountaintop experiences that a lot of people have in common—say, getting married, and having children.

When a couple who truly love each other get married, there is a real glow about them. My husband says he remembers “smiling like an idiot” all day on our wedding day.

The true happiness of a wedding is in the start of a loving couple’s life together. All the hoopla is nice, but it is all extra.

Later, of course, there are many days in married life without much glow. The car won’t start, there are bills piling up, the house needs cleaning. That’s okay—the mountaintop experience of the wedding is meant to carry the couple, and give inspiration through the ordinary parts of life.

The birth of a baby is the same. It’s a time of utter joy and gladness, and that mountaintop experience carries us through colic and teething, and terrible twos, and sassiness, and so on and so forth not to mention the teenaged years.

So many of our great and joyful experiences are followed by ordinary times, even difficult times. We pray that we will get that job—we do—and then they expect us to get up and go to work and actually work!

Maybe you think that these mountaintop experiences don’t count if they have to be followed by ordinary stretches of time, or that the experiences don’t last long enough.

Not really. If we could stay forever in the first thrilling emotions, whether in romance, or family, or achievements of one kind or another, we couldn't stand it. We'd be worn out in no time, trying to live on that mountaintop, in that heightened state of emotions.

Any way, we can all relate to mountaintop experiences, even if in the expected usual events of human life.

Yet, for Peter and James and John, this was not a usual, expected event. It was spiritual and religious in nature. It must have given them inspiration and strength to be Christians and be faithful to the Lord, in the earliest days of Christianity.

One source describes the Transfiguration and the elements of the passage this way:

“By this narrative the author means to describe a vision of Jesus in heavenly glory as the Messiah [the Savior sent by God]. 6 days later means [later,] after Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah [when he first began to realize it]. Transfigured, having a non-earthly appearance. The prophet Elijah was Expected to appear on earth before the Messiah appeared. Moses, [was] the lawgiver . . .” (From The Oxford Annotated Bible, except for bracketed portions by Rev. Sally DeMasters)

We might say that in this experience, Peter and James and John saw Jesus as he really was—as God's Son. They had lived with him, traveled with him, learned from him, and see him as a human being—they had seen his human side. And even through they had witnessed Jesus performing miracles, it hadn't completely sunk in that Jesus was truly of God. Now they were seeing his God side.

Now they knew; they didn't understand it perfectly, but as time went along, it would sink in, and give them courage and strength for the days to come.

They slipped up some. Peter was to deny that he ever knew Jesus. But later, he and James and John became founders of the church.

We too, are blessed with special mountaintop experiences of God. We, too, occasionally falter in our faith and our behaviors. Yet, there is hope, there is forgiveness. If Peter could become the great rock of the church, the first Pope, St. Peter, the one pictured at the gate of heaven, then we too can overcome our failings, with God's help, and be true and faithful Christians, the people God means us to be.

Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)