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Matthew 16:13-17:9

### “HIGHS AND LOWS”

Jesus tells Peter, and James, and John to put on their hiking boots. And he leads them up a mountain. As they climbed that mountain, Peter and James and John probably had a clue that something significant was about to happen to them—because in those times mountains were considered holy places, places where God drew close to the earth. We today still have that notion in our collective consciousness. Think about the classic cartoons of an exhausted pilgrim scaling a rugged mountain peak to reach the holy man seated serenely atop the summit. Think of the way we speak about profound life-changing moments in our lives as our having “a mountain-top experience.” We still think of mountains as a metaphor for places where holy encounters happen.

We see this same concept surface in today’s reading about Moses. Moses goes up a mountain where he has a holy encounter with God and receives the Ten Commandments. Did you happen to notice all the similarities between Moses’ mountain-top experience and the story of Jesus’ mountain-top experience? Both Moses and Jesus take companions up a mountain. Both are enveloped in a cloud. Both are transfigured. Both Moses’ and Jesus’ faces shine with a radiant light. All these similarities are intentional. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, the writer repeatedly portrays Jesus as the “new Moses,” the one who comes with God’s authority to fulfill the law given to Moses.

Jesus’ holy encounter with God on that mountain is remarkably similar to Moses’ only on steroids. Jesus is transfigured before the disciples and becomes all glowing and bright. And suddenly there appears with Jesus two of the great Jewish leaders of all time: Moses and Elijah.

And they all chat for a bit. And there is a cloud, and there is God's voice. It is an awesome experience.

Awesome and yet, for most of us, rather un-relatable. This story of the Transfiguration is kind of weird and strange and not like any experience most of us have ever had. And so this story takes some work to unpack and understand.

All the elements in this story of the Transfiguration point to one thing: God's glorification of Jesus. God's glory envelopes Jesus. All the lights and sounds and voices and people in this experience convey that Jesus receives God's special glory. And in that way, the Transfiguration is something of a preview to the Easter experience when the Resurrected Jesus will rise in glory and triumph over the forces of evil.

And while the disciples are overcome by all they witness, they do like the idea of being around all that glory and what it means for them as Jesus' companions. Peter suggests, "Let's build some dwellings so we can continue to bask in all this glory." After all, who wants to leave the mountain top high? But that suggestion will not work for Jesus. He gathers up the disciples and they head back down to the valley—back down to where the rest of the disciples are waiting, back down to the valley where their lives are hard, where their sufferings are real, where their struggles are great.

The valley is where we also live amid life's tedium and hardships. All of life's muck and mess takes place in the valley. It's where we deal with marriages that are fragmented, with children who are struggling, with parents who are aging. It's here in the valley where we worry about paying the bills, where we go for chemotherapy, where the roof leaks and the car breaks down and the dog bites the neighbor. The valley is where crime and abuse and cruelty take place.

We valley-dwellers will seek all kinds of ways to escape the realities of valley life. We turn to the bottle or to drugs or to shopping or to a Caribbean cruise for a moment of blessed relief. Sometimes we go seeking mountains where we can find something purer and holier than the lives we know. And so we go searching for those people and places that will help us rise above the valley. We look for gurus and wisdom-teachers. We enter monasteries and cloisters. The magnificent cathedrals of the world create mountain-top places of holiness. Everything about their architecture, the soaring ceilings, the stained glass windows, the incense, the muffled silence, the candles, gives a person the feeling that you are someplace special, some place holy, some place set apart from the ordinary lives we lead. It is as if we have scaled our own holy mountain and entered the realm of the holy. Sometimes we seek holy places where we can feel closer to God, where there is greater purity.

And yet, once we step outside the doors of those holy spaces, once we return from the vacation to Cancun or the Rocky Mountains and unpack the suitcase, we find ourselves back in the valley. And we feel the gap between the two realms. Mountains are up here. And valleys are down here. And there is a gap between the mountain high we've enjoyed so briefly and the valley low we inhabit daily. Or we feel the gap that exists in our hearts and minds regarding things we have not even known or experienced but we nevertheless wish for, long for, work for, pray for. A world of peace. A healthy body. A stable family. A meaningful job. And we feel the gap between the way things are and the way we long for them to be.

But Jesus closes that gap. Jesus closes the gap between the mountain and the valley. All that love and affirmation Jesus receives up on the mountain, all the holiness which comes from being in God's presence, Jesus carries all that with him back down the mountain into the valley.

And there in the valley he shares that glory of God's love, the holiness of God's presence with those he healed and taught and touched and forgave.

I don't think the story of the Transfiguration can be understood without recalling the story that comes immediately before this event—which is why I expanded the passage today to include the story where Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is. Peter blurts out a wonderful answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus affirms Peter's answer. Jesus tells him, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” And Jesus tells him that he will give Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Now talk about a mountain top experience. Peter had to have grown six inches after such affirmation. Peter is standing on the heights of affirmation and praise and glory.

But notice what happens next. Jesus starts to unpack what living out the glory of the kingdom of heaven will mean. And he talks about his own approaching suffering and death. And he talks about his disciples picking up their own crosses of hardship and sacrifice and following him on that hard, hard path of love and justice and compassion and forgiveness. In a blink of an eye, Jesus takes his disciples from the mountain of glory to the valley of suffering. Because, for Jesus, the holiness of God, the glory of God, is found in the valley: by sharing love, and extending compassion, and offering forgiveness, and working for justice. Jesus closes the gap by bringing the holiness of the mountain down to the valley.

God's holiness does not stay on mountains or in cathedrals. God's holiness and love and glory are brought into the messy, mucky valleys of our lives and our world whenever we love and serve and care and share—whenever we accept God's grace for ourselves and let it transform our lives. And the gap between who we are and who God enables us begins to shrink.

And mountains and valleys grow closer together. And much to our surprise, we may discover that a mountain top experience has shot up smack dab in the middle of a valley.