

The View from the Heights
Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36
Last Sunday after Epiphany
Transfiguration Sunday (March 3) 2019

In John Graves classic Texas book, *Goodbye to a River*, Graves and his dog (a half-grown dachshund puppy) have been canoeing the Brazos River for over a week with two weeks to go. He pulls his canoe ashore and does some exploring and reflecting around a place where he knows an old hermit used to live in a cave years before. He finds a trail that leads up from river to the top of the bluffs above. Graves writes:

A river has few "views." It seeks the lowest line of its country, straight or crooked, and what you see when you travel along it are mostly river and sky and trees, water and clouds and sun and shore. Things a quarter-mile away exist for you only because you know they are there; your consciousness of them is visual only if you walk ashore to see them. For a man who likes rivers, most of the time that is all right; for a man who seeks sharp solitude, it's special. But sometimes, too, the shores close in a bit as room walls will, and you crave more space. . . . Now, without having thought about doing so, I clambered beyond the hermit's hole up ledges, hoisting the pup at spots, to the top of the bluff.

I was out of breath when I got there, but it was a fine spot and worth the climb... As you stand there on weathered solid stone, the lowlands roll south and east from below you to the horizon; your eye can trace fifteen miles or so of the river's course as it meanders over sand, slower and flattened, between tall bright cottonwoods and oaks and pecans, and where you can't see it you can guess it, and can guess too the things around it, knowing them. Though it's nothing as much in comparison to the vistas you get in real mountains, after a week in the Brazos

winding trough, it dizzied me a little; it made fun of what I had been doing. Heights have that kind of humor (Goodbye to a River, p. 126).

Both of our Scripture readings are about views from the heights. Moses is up on Mt. Sinai receiving the Commandments of God, and talking with God about where the Hebrew children are going in their future. In Luke, Jesus takes Peter, John, and James up on a mountain to pray. While Jesus prays, he is transfigured – he becomes bright with light coming from inside him and his clothes shine dazzling white. Suddenly Moses and the great prophet Elijah appear and are talking with Jesus about his departure, literally talking about his exodus. In other words, he knows that when he heads down this mountain he will be walking into a maelstrom of conflict, of confrontation with the Powers of Death, struggle and agony, ending up on a cross of torture and execution. Up on the heights, Jesus looks back at the life of Israel and the Law and the Prophets, he looks back at his own ministry, what he's done and what he's taught and he looks forward to where he's going. It's been hard but it's fixing to get a whole lot harder.

As Jesus faces the cross, he faces torture and death. But that's not all. Jesus is confronting the Powers of Evil, Sin, and Death. He will be walking into the very essence of Darkness, which is preparing to throw everything in Evil's power at him. He will take on the full brunt of Evil: pure hate, rage, violence, and total darkness. He will receive it all, absorb it on the cross, and it will kill him dead.

I think Jesus knows that he is facing this. I don't think he knows exactly but I think he knows when he goes down the mountain it is going to get really rough. And I think he believes in faith that he will be resurrected; by faith he believes that God will vindicate him and defeat the Power of Sin and Death. I think by faith he

knows this. In other words, I do not think Jesus knew certainty, without a shadow of doubt that he would be resurrected. He wasn't sure; he hoped. Nevertheless, he was going to face, receive, and break the Power of Evil and Sin, which holds all of us enthralled in its power.

That's why the two biggest persons of the Old Testament join him: Moses representing the Torah (the Law), and Elijah representing the Prophets. And it's why the mountaintop is enveloped in a cloud – representing the presence of God's very Self. Jesus, Moses, Elijah, and the disciples hear a voice from the cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him" (Luke 9:35). Jesus needs all the help he can get in order to come down from the heights of that mountain and walk into the Darkness. He needs strength and resolve and he gets it.

It's up on the heights, in God's presence, that Jesus takes stock of the situation; he looks back, he looks forward, and he is fortified for the fight.

Every Sunday you come to the heights, to the Austin Heights. This is where you are invited to take stock of your lives, where you've been and where you're going. And it is where you are fortified for the fight.

Like John Graves down in the trough of the Brazos River, we go through our lives the best we can. We keep our nose down and try to get to the next thing, or try to do multiple things at once. Rarely do we have a chance to look up and look around. Then Sunday comes and without really thinking about it, we go up to the Austin Heights and for a while, in God's presence, we're able to have view at the big picture of our lives. We're given a vista. We can look back at where we've been and perhaps we can take a moment to look ahead at where we're going. We

don't do this every Sunday but we have a chance every Sunday morning. We're invited to take a view from the heights.

And our whole congregation does the same thing. We are able to look back and realize. "My heavens, this 50th year of our church has been hard." We've had some of our most beloved and central church members die. We're at a place of transition and change and we're working with brand-new members and visitors, young adults and young families trying to get everyone integrated into the life of the church, learning to worship, learning to be followers of Jesus, and learning how a church works. We're trying to pay the bills and trying to serve. At the same time, some of us are getting older and are getting tired and feel the need for help.

We look to the future and a lot of it does not look easy. So much fear, much of which shows up in people's bigotry. Plus, there's climate change, immigration, racism, cancer, guns, anxiety about health and anxiety about health care. Besides the worries related to our own families and our job and on and on.

But up on the heights God shows up. And here's a lesson I've learned from the Eastern Orthodox Church: the Transfiguration of Jesus is also about us. Maybe we hear a voice we need to hear: "You are my beloved son... you are my beloved daughter. You are chosen. I am with you. You are not alone and you will never, never be forsaken."

At the end of the 2000 movie *Castaway*, starring Tom Hanks, he stops his car at a crossroads and gets out looking at his map on the hood of his car. He's not on the heights and certainly not a mountaintop but he might as well be. He's at a crossroads north of Amarillo, in the middle of the flat high plains. He can see, we

can see, 20 miles in every direction. A woman pulls up in a 1953 or 54 Ford pickup and says, "You look lost." He says, "I do?" She asks, "Where you headed? Hanks replies, "Well, I was just about to figure that out." She proceeds to give him directions, wishes him luck and drives off. And the movie ends, the music comes up, with him standing there looking at the different roads he might take. What's next? Where's he going? What's next for me? Where am I going?

Sometimes we're lost. Or at least, we're so busy we don't know for sure where we are. But here, up on the heights in the presence of God we get our perspective back. We get some direction. We rediscover or discover for the first time, that we are called, we are chosen, by Almighty God and we know once again that we're not alone.

Jesus and the disciples come down from the heights and immediately they come to a man who cries for help, saying that a demon seizes his son, the Powers of Darkness controls his son. Jesus rebukes the powers, heals the boy, and gives the son back to his father.

The battle has begun.

And so it will be with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.

The Transfiguration is a sacramental moment. In this story we see a mark of a deeper and more profound reality into which we are invited. That is what sacraments are meant to do—not to mark out the holy in the world, to create veils and borders, but to show us the world that is to be and supposed to be. As Alexander Schmemmann explains in his beautiful book, *For the Life of the World*, “Sacraments are “always a *passage*, a *transformation*. Yet it is not a ‘passage’ into ‘supernature,’ but into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ.”