

First Lutheran Church, Aitkin
Pastor Douglas Larson

Matthew 16:24-17:8

Sunday, March 3, 2019

Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen

Our Gospel talks about a mountain top. What comes to mind with that word? There is that old song, "On Top of Old Smokey" all covered with snow, that says the writer lost his true love because of courting too slow. Moses goes up to the top of Mt. Sinai after bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. There, on the top there are clouds and lightning and Moses talks with God. He then receives the Ten Commandments. When he comes down his face is so bright the people can't look at him and tell him to put a cloth over his face. Moses, at the end of his life stood on Mt. Nebo, west of the Jordan River. He looked over the valley to the Promised Land. The Lord would not let Moses enter the land because he and others had refused to trust the Lord forty years earlier when the Lord told them to enter the land. They were to trust that the Lord would give them victory. So Moses looks from the mountain top onto the Promised Land. Elijah the prophet challenged the prophets of Baal to a showdown on Mt. Carmel. Both sides built an altar, put wood on it and a bull as a sacrifice. Both were to call on their god to light the sacrifice. After hours of calling on Baal, Elijah calls on the Lord to light his sacrifice and the Lord does. Martin Luther King, Jr. in a sermon the night before he was assassinated said, "I have been to the mountain top, I have seen the other side. I may not get there with you. But I have seen the other side."

In our Gospel, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain. It might have been Mt. Herman in northern Galilee, about 9,000 feet high. There, before the disciple's eyes, Jesus is transformed, transfigured, changed so that he shines with brilliance. Then Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus. Moses and Elijah are the two major people of the Old Testament. Moses had his mountain top experience on Mt. Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from the Lord. Elijah challenged and defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Watching this scene Peter blurts out that if Jesus wants, he will build three tents or dwellings for them. As Peter is speaking a very bright cloud comes over them and a voice interrupts Peter saying, "This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." The disciples bow in reverence and fear. Then Jesus touches them and says, rise up, do not be afraid. They see only Jesus.

What a magnificent experience it must have been. Those disciples saw Jesus in all his glory. It had to have been a truly "Wow!" experience. One you never forget.

Have you had a mountaintop experience? Have you literally stood on a peak somewhere and seen the mountains around? Or has your mountaintop experience been more figurative? One where you sense the dimensions of the world have been opened and you have seen into a new realm? I would like to hear from you who have had a mountain top experience, whether literal or figurative. Stop in and tell me some time.

The book of Revelation is a mountaintop experience. The Christians in Asia Minor in the late first century were being told by the Roman Emperor, you can worship your other gods but you also have to worship me or I will arrest, persecute and maybe even kill you if you don't. Into that situation God gives a man named John a mountaintop experience. In Revelation, there are symbols, animals, songs, voices from the heaven and together it tells the Christians to hold on to their faith. God pulls back the curtain of history, allowing John a mountaintop experience that says how the world ends. The answer is that God wins! Hold on to your faith. God is the winner.

The mountaintop experience that Peter, James and John had was not to give them a warm, tingly feeling. No, when they saw Jesus transfigured in all his glory, heard the voice of God from the cloud, they bowed in fear, awe and reverence. Jesus touches them and says, Get up, do not be afraid. When they looked up, and this is important, they saw no one, only Jesus, alone. Jesus was the one Lord. He was more than Moses and Elijah.

I don't know if I have had a mountain top experience or not. And maybe you aren't sure about yourself. But Jesus took Peter, James and John along to the mountaintop. Doesn't Jesus also take us along every week to worship, to prayer, to reading God's Word, to Holy Communion, to being unified as we hold hands during the Lord's Prayer, to sharing with others in conversation, to remembering that as we were baptized into Christ's death we are also raised up with Christ each day? What is happening in this journey with Jesus? Aren't we seeing him?

Maybe these aren't mountaintop experiences like Moses, Elijah, Peter, James and John had. Yet in the course of these days with Jesus, if we see Jesus then we have done the same as Peter, James and John—we have seen Jesus our Lord.