

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE EXPERIENCE OF FAITH”
Luke 9:28-36
February 28, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

The experience of faith is like climbing a mountain, surveying the countryside, and then descending the mountain to explore the valley. The heights give us the view we need to avoid dangerous turns and to seek desirable goals. Climbing to the mountain tops is the blessing of a vibrant faith, but the work of faith is done in the valley.

The valley is often the place of struggle and suffering. Most of the people we pray for are in some valley situation. The valley can also be a place of growth and change.

The three disciples, Peter, James and John, were given an unforgettable experience in being allowed to see the transfigured Christ. Jesus would continue and complete the work of Moses and Elijah. He would need the help of his disciples and lead them down from the mountaintop into the valley.

The land of Palestine is surprisingly small in comparison with its historical and biblical significance. It is about the size of the state of Vermont. Even when its boundaries included the modern states of Israel, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, it was no more than five hundred miles long and ninety-five miles wide. Palestine is a land of great heights and awesome depths. Mt. Hermon, north of the Sea of Galilee, is 9,230 ft. above sea level, while the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth, its surface being thirteen hundred feet below sea level. These extremes of high and low places make Palestine like the terrain of faith.

The biblical story cannot be told without the mountains. Mountains have both literal and symbolic significance in the Bible. Abraham climbed Mt. Moriah with a heavy heart, only to learn that God wants, not child sacrifice, but trust and faithfulness. Mt. Sinai was the mountain of the Exodus story, where God

communed with Moses. Later, from Mt. Nebo, Moses viewed the long-awaited Promised Land, which he would not enter. Mt. Ephraim was the site of the battle between David and Absalom. Mt. Carmel was the scene of Elijah's showdown with Jezebel and the prophets of Baal. Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mt. of Olives. There are many others. Important things happen on mountains in the Bible.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow described what he called **“peak experiences”** in the lives of productive, healthy, and creative individuals. **“The person in the peak-experiences feels more integrated (unified, whole, all-of-a-piece), than at other times. . . [and] feels himself to be at the peak of his powers, using all his capacities at their best and fullest.”** Maslow himself observed how similar peak-experiences are to religious conversion. Maslow said that a person **“needs a religion or religion surrogate to live by, in the same sense he needs sunlight, calcium, or love.”** Life has to have some meaningful framework for a person to survive. Most of us have had **“peak”** or mountaintop experiences that were so significant they are impossible to forget. Many of us center our lives in the memory of such experiences, and wish all of life could be a mountaintop experience. That's why we look forward to the Nigerian Christian Community experience during Black History Month. This is a mountaintop experience for us.

It is impossible to remain in peak or mountaintop experiences. Life requires descents as well as ascents, and faith must be lived in the valleys as well as on the mountains. Jesus took Peter, James and John to the top of a high mountain. What occurred seems strange to us. In a mystical moment the body of Jesus was transfigured into a transcendent and resplendent form. His clothing became dazzling white, and two other figures were suddenly present with Jesus. They were Moses and Elijah. A cloud appeared, and the voice of God was heard saying. ***“This is my Son, my Chosen One, listen to him!”***

Almost any Jew would immediately understand the significance of Moses and Elijah appearing with Jesus. Judaism had two sources of authority: the Law, personified by Moses; and the Prophets, represented by Elijah. This manifestation signified that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Jesus is the unique and full revelation of God, for which all previous revelations have been preparation. This was certainly a **“peak-experience”** for the three disciples, the kind of moment they wished could last forever. Peter even suggested that they build three permanent dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah!

They could not stay on the mountain of transfiguration, however. What must

have been as disappointing, according to Matthew's Gospel, was that Jesus told them not to even tell anyone about the experience. So, with Jesus, they came down the mountain. And, little did they know, they would soon follow Jesus to Jerusalem and his death.

The valley has been almost as useful a metaphor as the mountain. Often the valley has represented the opposite of the **“peak-experience.”** Remember the **“valley of dry bones”** in Ezekiel. There was John Bunyan's **“valley of humiliation,”** and Tennyson wrote of the six hundred who rode into the **“valley of death.”** Sometime this entire world has been seen as a valley - - a **“vale of tears,”** or an empty and meaningless valley. John Keats said, **“Call this world the vale of soul-making.”** And maybe it is a valley for growing up into the fullness of Jesus Christ.

In the natural world, many things cannot grow on mountaintops. Above the timberline almost nothing will grow. Most things grow best in valleys. Do you remember the commercial of the **“the valley of the Jolly Green Giant”**? While they may lack the excitement of mountain peaks, valleys tend to be growing places. Isn't it also true spiritually? Don't we grow more in the valley than on the mountaintop? As wonderful as it is to ascend the mountain, as priceless as the mountain view may be, it is in the valley where we are challenged to follow Christ!

It was up in Caesarea Philippi where Jesus began preparing his disciples for his death. He also tried to prepare them for the time when they would take up crosses of their own. But they couldn't hear it. They still expected a future of only peak experiences with Jesus, certainly not a descent into the valley of the shadow of death. But consider what they became! Think of the spiritual giants and the blessed saints they became! We, too, are called to follow Christ. We do so knowing that the journey will involve both peaks and valleys, and that neither is less important than the other.

Many biblical and religious symbols are drawn from the world of nature, especially those signifying contrasts. For example, day and night, seedtime and harvest, sowing and reaping, waking and sleeping, mountains and valleys are all expressive of the life of faith. We, too, are creatures of nature, and need the full range of human experiences if we are to grow and blossom. Spiritual maturity involves accepting the many natural contrasts in life.

Now that we have been to the mountaintop, I want to invite you back down into the valley. If you are ready to walk through the valley of service to others and

embrace the whole life of faith with its ups and downs, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.