

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: 2 Peter 1:16-21 and Luke 9:28-36

Sermon Title: "Excellent Experiences" (Transfiguration of the Lord)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

February 10, 2013

On the day that Jesus climbed a mountain and transfigured himself, there were three men with him. Peter, James, and John. These three disciples were Jesus' inner circles of disciples, with whom he would share deeper spiritual matters.

We read about these men joining Jesus on the mountain in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Luke tells us about the emotional state of the men. They were daydreaming on the mountain, and then suddenly light explodes around them as though the sun just fell on top of them. Peter tries to respond to the situation by asking if they should fashion three tents for Jesus and his visitors. Luke says that he had no idea what he was saying. Neither would we. It would be like the phone ringing at 4:00am and we have to rush to answer it.

One moment they are in La-la-Land and the next they are surrounded by glory. Light pouring down on them. A voice calling out from heaven. Moses and Elijah, great leaders of Jewish history, standing there as though they are actual flesh and bone. And then it

is all done. The voice ceases. The light dims. Silence remains.

We don't know what James and John thought about the experience, but Peter talks about it in his second letter toward the end of the Bible. Peter speaks about reverence and magnificence. He calls the voice of God the Excellent Glory. He says they were witnesses of Christ's majesty, his kingliness. Whatever happened on that mountain must have been incredible. Peter might not have known what was going on at the moment, but he may reflect on the situation and know that he was in the middle of something that was earth-shattering. He must have felt like Moses, speaking with God face-to-face on that mountain.

On Facebook I know a pastor from PA who will post these pictures of sunsets. They are usually taken from some beach somewhere. I always wonder how those sunsets inspire her in ministry. Every time she sees the sun going down, does she reflect on the beauty of God? Does she think of reverence toward God, worshipping God for his mighty hand? Does she see God's glory in the different colors on the horizon, and do they warm her heart in being thankful that she is a minister of God?

We see a picture of a child who is bald from months of chemotherapy. She holds a sign saying that she suffers from cancer, and we can tell how much she has suffered just by looking at her. But she has a smile on her face. There is an expression of joy that tells us that she is okay, despite how sick she may be. Such pictures inspire us to “go on.” We consider what we are suffering through, and it doesn’t compare to what the little girl has experienced. We also witness God’s love in her smile. We feel God’s embrace, as we trust that God is embracing her. Somehow we know this will work out. She will either win against cancer or not, and in either case God takes care of her. God is taking care of us.

We have these moments on mountaintops or in everyday living, and we call them glorious. We experience God’s deep love, overwhelming power, and infinite splendor. We don’t forget these times with God too easily. They remain in our memories, and we look forward to the next time that we might encounter God’s excellent glory again.

Peter shares with his readers that excellent experience on the mountaintop, because he is considering his own death. In the verses before, Peter senses that the end of the line has come for him.

“Shortly I must put off my tent,” is what he says.

And so he wants to impart to his readers one or two last words of wisdom. He wants to assure his readers that he never came to them with devised fables, cunning stories just to make them follow him. No smoke and mirrors here. No parlor tricks. Every word he shared about Christ was real. Every word about Christ was backed up by the power of its message. And the words that Peter shared about Christ should carry his readers, his disciples, from one experience to another. Those words of power should sustain them, no matter what they may go through. Hard times, easy times, times of sadness and despair, times of joy and celebration.

Peter himself was mindful of his own death. The way people were acting, the rumors he was hearing, the feeling he might have received from God: he knew he was not long for this planet. But even he held on to the words about Christ. He knew the power behind them. That power – the feeling that something is surging through our bodies, giving us hope and peace and motivation – that power took Peter back to the time of Jesus’ transfiguration. That power helped him remember that he not only heard words of power, he saw power. He felt power as he witnessed Jesus revealing the vastness, the depth, of his glory, which is

more than anybody could take in. Peter saw Jesus as more than just a human being. He witnessed Jesus as God, as Moses saw God, and you don't forget that moment ever.

Peter recalls that transfiguration as he contemplates his death. But there must have been other times, when Peter reflected on that excellent experience.

There was the time when Peter stood up for the 11 disciples in an upper room.¹ They had just received the power of the Holy Spirit and were speaking in different tongues, but people thought they were drunk. Peter had to lift up his voice, and he said that there was no way these men could be drunk. Don't you remember the words from the prophet Joel? Don't you remember what he said about the Spirit being poured out on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters prophesying, and your young men seeing visions, and your old men dreaming dreams? Is it possible Peter could have remembered standing on the mountain with Jesus, and seeing the Holy Spirit surrounding the Son of God and Moses and Elijah, anointing them with brilliance and splendor?

There was the time when Peter and John were

¹ Cf. Acts 2.

walking from the temple.² They were passing through the Beautiful Gate, when they saw a lame man on the ground, begging for money. Peter says, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Is it possible that Peter could have remembered the words of God from heaven, booming all around them, saying, “This is my beloved Son, hear him!” Could he have heard those words echoing in his ear, as though God was speaking right then to him? Could he feel the vibration in his body, and power striking that lame man with such force, so that he got up and walked for the first time ever?

There were many times that Peter performed ministry. He healed. He spoke. He stood up for the cause. He eventually died for the cause. We are never told that in each moment of ministry he thought about his excellent experience on the mountaintop with Jesus. 2 Peter 1 is the only time he talked about it. It had to have been there, though. You don't forget something like that. You don't push it aside as something that once happened, and it was no big deal. Privately, it had to have motivated him for ministry. The power of the words, the glory of God surrounding Christ, the depth of holiness overwhelming him and

² Cf. Acts 3.

the two other men. We are sure that he was considering it in the last days or weeks of his life. He knew his labors were not in vain. He knew that his life in Christ was true, and nothing could take it away.

We also have excellent experiences to reflect upon. We might not have seen the glory of Christ or actually have witnessed the face of God like Peter did. But we encountered God in some way. We encountered God in a deep fashion, deeper than anything we have experienced before. We might not have seen God's face, but we sure came close to it. We might not have heard God's actual voice, but it wasn't our voice we heard. Nobody else was speaking. We might not have felt God's actual touch, but there was no denying that God was with us in a physical way.

Our excellent experience might have come through a healing of some kind. The cancer was removed. The illness was gone. We call it a miracle. We know God touched us, as though his hand came from somewhere and literally touched our bodies. An excellent experience might have occurred, when a problem was solved. We couldn't see how things were going to turn out. There was no way we could survive the next weeks or months, knowing what we knew then, having to endure that terrible thing that we could not escape.

But escape came. The clouds were lifted from our minds, and we could think clearly. Instead of dread we felt confidence, a holy confidence coming directly from God. Instead of fear we had courage, a courage that sounds like the voice of God whispering in our ears, telling us that we can do all things through Christ. We have had these experiences. Maybe not on the mountaintop but definitely somewhere on this common earth amid the busy schedules we must keep.

I remember a classmate on mine in college who had an excellent experience. He was 10 years old than me. He had graduated from high school with mediocre grades, had dated dozens of women just for the good times, had drunk whatever he could, had smoked whatever he could; and then God took a hold of his life. God wanted my friend to go to college, and then go to seminary. George was his name. One night he told me that he was in his apartment, sitting quietly on his sofa. He had been doing some homework but then needed some time just to be quiet with God. He said that in his time of reflection, all of a sudden a force surge through his body. He described it as a ball of electricity that went through his back and out his chest. It took his breath away. He sat on that sofa, eyes wide open, shaking and sweating. He told me about this experience, because he said that it was

God's way of telling him that he was with George. George encountered the power of God to turn a former drug-head – an uncaring, irresponsible man – into a compassionate leader of the church. He never forgot how God touched him, removing doubts and worries and confusion.

A man from our church shared an excellent experience with me once. He came to me and said, "I have seen what heaven looks like." If anybody else had told me this, I would have been nice but would have said (sarcastically), "Yeah, right, sure." Yet, I knew the spiritual awareness of this man, so I was intrigued. I thought he might tell me that heaven's streets are paved in gold, that all the walls are washed in a bright white, that everybody is wearing clean robes and possibly shiny halos. What he described was something I cannot forget. He said, "In heaven, nothing is dead. Everything is alive. Imagine all the trees with all the leaves, and not one leaf is discolored and wilting and ready to fall off. Not one piece of bark is hanging off the tree, dead because of some fungus or disease. Every blade of grass is alive: no brown patches or bald spots. All the plants, all the animals, everything is alive. And with everything being alive, so are all the colors. We cannot imagine what color really looks like, because our earthly colors are muted, dull.

In heaven, even the colors are alive, and vibrant. Nothing is dead.” He doesn’t forget that vision of heaven, and although I never had that vision I sure can imagine it. I personally cannot wait to see what he was talking about.

We are witnesses to God’s excellent glory. At some moment in our lives, or many in several moments in our lives, we have seen God. We heard him, felt the touch, receive the encouragement. God was present just like a person standing with us. We witnessed it.

Nobody may convince us that we were not touched by God. Nothing may diminish the fact that God revealed himself to us in a deep, spiritual way. Our excellent experiences move us forward. We know that God’s words hold power. We know God’s majesty lifts us up from our dark sin. We know God’s will is going to be done.