

What is it about mountains? During the semester in college I spent studying in Oslo, I had the opportunity to hike up a mountain with about fifteen other international students. Many of the students, including myself, were amateur climbers – I had been on top of mountains but never hiked or climbed up a mountain in my life. I knew that the hike would be hard, but I had no idea it would take eight hours to ascend the mountain and only two hours to go back down. The trek upwards, though beautiful, was difficult. There was hardly a set trail or path and many times I found myself grabbing tree branches to pull myself up almost vertical inclines. There were pleasant moments of rest along the way when we refilled our water bottles from the clear stream nearby and tasted the wild blueberries growing in abundance around us. But mostly, it was incredibly strenuous and exhausting. In the course of the eight hours it took to reach the top, we climbed through three seasons- we began the hike in summer, ascended through fall, and finally ended in feet of snow at the top. All of that was certainly worth it, though. The view from the top of the mountain was breath-taking to say the least. What is it about mountains?

After reading the text from Mark for today, and thinking back on Norway, I started thinking about all of the different mountaintops I've been on and I realized something – I have been on top of a lot of mountains – everything from the Acropolis at Corinth to Montjuic park in Barcelona to Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park to our very own East Rock. Every time I travel somewhere new and there happens to be a large hill or mountain in the area, I make sure I get to the top of it before I leave. What is that about? There is something that beckons me to the tops of these mounds of earth. At the top I can be removed from the business and the life-as-usual that is below, and at the top I can see everything that is below all at once – the pieces of the world that I usually only get to see moment-by-moment come together to create an expansive mosaic stretching out all around me. When I am at the top of East Rock, for instance, I can see the places that make up my everyday life together in one landscape – I can see the divinity school and Bethesda, I can see Long Island sound, downtown New Haven and West Rock. So it is interesting that today's transfiguration story takes place on a mountaintop, removed from others and above life-as-usual, far above the crowds and chaos below, we hear a voice from heaven that gives us a moment of perspective and clarity. What is it about mountains?

Throughout Epiphany we have encountered stories in Mark that try to communicate what Jesus is all about. Today, on Transfiguration Sunday – the last Sunday before the beginning of the season of Lent, we read a story in which a voice from heaven – the voice of God – tells us exactly who Jesus is. “This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!” We know that God's voice is important and the climax of the story because everything – the dazzling white clothes, Moses and Elijah, Peter's words – they all lead up to God speaking and after God has been heard, everyone – Moses, Elijah, and the disciples, are dismissed. Unlike in the story of Jesus' baptism when God speaks to only Jesus, at this point God speaks to the disciples. It is finally time to clue them in on the secret of Jesus' true identity – the Son of God. Not that the disciples didn't have other opportunities to listen to Jesus cryptically referring to himself as the Son of Man, or to take note of his miraculous healings, casting out of demons, transgression of social boundaries, telling of parables, stilling of the waves, or walking on water before this point – because they did. But all those were mere hints compared to Jesus turning dazzling bright, being accompanied by long-gone Moses and Elijah, and the voice of God to make things crystal clear. Peter was so moved or so scared by this experience that he offered to build a religious shrine of sorts. But God responds to Peter by telling him to listen to Jesus. A shrine isn't necessary but listening is.

It seems easy, but actually Peter was having a hard time listening to Jesus. He had kind of had a rough go of it. Just before he and Jesus went up the mountain, Jesus had revealed that he would suffer, be rejected by the authorities, be killed, and rise after three days. Peter pushed back and assured Jesus he would never let that happen to his best friend and his Messiah. If one of my dearest friends told me something similar, I would certainly try to convince her that I would not let such a thing happen – I would find a way to protect her, because I am compelled to do that for someone I care about. If I were Peter, I might be feeling a little off balance wondering how the Son of God could possibly go through such things. He might have been dealing with the newly shaken image of the God he thought he knew. How could his God be rejected, suffer, and die? What would that mean for the work God was doing on earth? As if this rebuke from Jesus weren't enough, Peter had just followed Jesus up a mountain. If this mountain was anything like the one I climbed in Norway, it wasn't an easy task.

Peter's struggle to understand, his hike up the mountain after Jesus – it seems a bit like my experience of faith. Faith is not an easy thing to *have* – if it's something one can claim to possess at all. It's hard to try to understand how God works in my life. It's hard to hold on to beliefs that don't make much sense to the world I live in. When aspects of our society tell us to look out only for ourselves and to discard everything that does not benefit us, it is hard to resist. In a culture of consumerism, it is hard to remember our worth is found not in how many Apple products we own or how many degrees we have but in our identity as creatures of God. When it sometimes seems like all we see in the news are more reports of violence as a means of keeping control, it is hard to believe that God indeed is working in big and small ways to bring love, peace, and justice to all. It is hard to have faith.

Unlike Peter, most of us will not get the satisfaction of making it to the top of the mountain to have our faith validated so explicitly – to see Jesus transfigured and to hear the voice of God so clearly. Doesn't this story make you *wish* it would happen to you? Doesn't it leave you wishing Jesus would appear, turn dazzely, and a voice from heaven would speak to you telling you exactly who to listen to and what to listen for? Yes, we read of this experience in Holy Scripture and by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit we come to understand something of who God is. But even so, reading a story is not the same as living it. So what does this mean for us? What does this mean for those of us who haven't had such supernatural and extreme moments of mountaintop clarity? What about those of us who feel like sometimes our faith journeys aren't nearly as clear?

Last summer I was in Minneapolis completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education – CPE. In this program I spent the summer learning about myself and the work of hospital chaplaincy along with three other seminary students. During my summer as a hospital chaplain intern, I encountered much suffering, pain, and death. I also encountered some joy. Needless to say, the program was probably one of the most difficult things I've done in my life. The summer was a time when faith was hard to hold on to at times and life seemed anything but clear. What was *I* to say or do for someone on the verge of death? How could *I* possibly help the mother whose four-month-old daughter was lying intubated in the emergency room? Yet, as I have found at other times in my life, this muddled time with anything but clear experiences or answers was a time when I saw God transfigured and God transfiguring. In the love between families, in the

relationships built learning together with my colleagues, and even in grief, God was being transfigured. Somehow God was present when I felt inadequate and somehow the fact that God worked in complex and messy situations made it all the more full of grace.

In our very frail, mortal, and contemporary lives, at least in mine – God does not appear dazzling white or speak directly to me from heaven. My life is often messy, confusing, and anything but clear. And that does not mean God is absent. It just means God is big enough to be breaking into our world in the midst of and even by the means of its messiness. We trek up and down many mountains in our lives, waiting for a brilliant moment of clarity or validation. But God may just be transfiguring right in front of us – on the clear days, the foggy days, and everything in between.

--Abby Ferjak