

“Can You Relate”  
Matthew 17:1-9  
March 6, 2011

Have you ever experienced an event that was so good, you did not want it to end? Perhaps you were on the golf course, and every shot went down the center of the fairway gently bouncing to rest in the short grass. Oh, I wish the afternoon would not end. Perhaps you fell in love. You were walking on a warm night, and suddenly everything felt so right, and Cupid’s arrow came out of nowhere piercing your heart. You wish the evening would never end. Perhaps you just had a perfect day at the beach – sunny skies, lots of laughter and now, watching the sun go down over the purple water, you think, “I wish this moment would never end.” Can you relate? If you’ve ever had moments like that, been soaked in moments like that, you know what it is to say, “I’ve been to the mountaintop.”

Lots of things happen on the mountaintop. The air is crisper and cooler when it fills our lungs, and God things happen up on the mountaintop. In Exodus 19, Moses went to the mountaintop and came back with the Ten Commandments. In I Kings 19, Elijah took refuge on that same mountaintop. Do you remember? God came! Not in the wind or the earthquake or the fire but in the sheer silence of holiness that sometimes blankets mountaintops like early spring snow. It makes sense that Jesus would be coming round the mountain, too.

He has just used strong language with his disciples. They are traveling. Jesus got so fed up with Peter that he told him to “Get behind me, Satan.” And, he told ALL of them that if they think they are following him to be exalted in their own wisdom or influential and respected in their religious circles, they’ve got the wrong guy. Then, he takes Peter, James and John for a prayer meeting –to the cloud. Things get really weird really fast. That makes this story different. Usually, with biblical stories, we can find some character to relate to, or there is some plot twist we can relate to. That’s the fun of reading. If there is no one you can relate to, why bother - which makes the Transfiguration a challenging read!

First of all, Jesus starts to shine. He lit up like a Christmas tree. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling, brilliant white. Obviously, no matter how much bleach we use in our laundry, none of us presume to fully relate to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. But there is something we have in common with Jesus even in this weird story: our humanity. As a human being, I suspect that Jesus was very tired at this point. That’s usually when he tried to get away for a prayer break, to get a different perspective. As a human being, perhaps he was wondering how effective his ministry had been to date. From the mountaintop perhaps he could see a crowd gathering, asking one another, “Where did that miracle worker go with his loaves and fishes. We are hungry!” Perhaps he could see others asking themselves, “Where did that healer go? We are sick!” Perhaps he could see the Pharisees clustered together, plotting against him. Perhaps he could see the rest of the disciples, milling about in confusion. Perhaps he wondered, “Will they follow me as I head for Jerusalem?” If you know what it is like to be tired, to have people seeking you out for what you can do for them, and other people criticizing you and working against you, if you have ever been filled with dread at what lies ahead, you have a little something in common with Jesus. If you know what it’s like to feel those things as a direct result of serving God, then you have even more in common with Jesus. Can you relate?

Jesus hiked up the mountain for a different perspective, and boy, did he get one – almost a science fiction perspective. As if being a glow-in-the dark Prince of Peace weren’t enough, enter the time traveling visitors. Out of nowhere, the Prophets of Ancient Israel call on Jesus.

Moses – the great representative of the Law pops up to the mountain to have a word. Do you remember about Moses? He did not want to be a prophet in the first place and made excuses to God to get out of it. (If you know what it's like to make excuses to God, you have something in common with Moses.) He gave in to the people, when he just couldn't stand their murmuring and complaining and rebelling another minute, with the consequence that, while God took him to the top of Mt. Nebo to survey the promised land, he couldn't enter into it. (If you have ever compromised your faith convictions for popular opinion, you have something in common with Moses. And if you have ever felt the pain of separation from God because of your actions, you have something in common with Moses.) Fearful, making mistakes, yet a man of faith. Can you relate? When we admit that, although we are excuse-making, soft-spined servants, we are still chosen and called to leadership we have a lot in common with Moses! Moses knew about both the suffering and the glory and he had come back to tell Jesus about the glory.

Now, Elijah seems a little more untouchable. This fearless prophet who, rather than dying like the rest of us, was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire. Can't really relate to that. But, he was also the same prophet who, when he found out Jezebel's forces were out to kill him, ran to the hills, and sat under a broom tree, begging for God to take his life. He could take people not listening to him, but he hadn't bargained on their trying to kill him. Any of us who have ever said to God, "This is the end of the line. I'm not following anymore. You didn't tell me about this" have a little something in common with Elijah.

That Moses and Elijah would come back from the grave to give Jesus a pep talk is nice, but you know, they did not put in their New Testament cameo just for Jesus' sake alone. They appeared to help the disciples answer a question they did not even know they were asking. Who is this Jesus? How does he fit in? What difference will he really make in the long run? With Moses and Elijah as character witnesses, clearly this is a Jesus with ties to the faith and the law and prophets and God Almighty. He's the fulfillment of what was started in the beginning. He changes the way you see everything. And, Peter and James and John see that firsthand.

It scares them to death. But, old Peter. He's such a guy! I'm not scared! Having just been called "Satan" he does not want his buddies or Jesus to think that he has no grit. So, as usual, he speaks up – Lord – the right way to start. It is so good that we are right here – a harmless observation, trying to be positive. If it is your will – he really does want to do the right thing – I will make three booths here – one for YOU and one for Moses and one for Elijah. Can't you picture Moses and Elijah looking at Jesus, scratching their heads, and asking "What's up with this guy?" But, you see, Peter is seeing people and hearing voices that he's never seen or heard before – a spiritual experience the likes of which he will never have again - and he wants some input. If you've ever been too eager to speak, if you've ever wanted someone to know how much you understand, if you've ever remembered a conversation and thought, "Oh, I wish I had not said that," then you have something in common with Peter.

Peter babbles on until a voice thunders in from heaven. This is my Son. LISTEN to him. In other words, "would you just shut up?" That scared those disciples so badly that they fell to the ground in a heap, and Jesus came over to them, touched them, and gave them the gospel message, "Fear not." They lifted their faces out of the dirt and saw no one except Jesus himself alone. Wow! Then Jesus says, "Guys, what happens on the mountain...at least until after my resurrection." It seems as if they respected his wishes. But I suspect they couldn't think of much else for days to come. Like when you stare at the sun for even a moment, and for a long time afterward, when you close your eyes or look at something else, the imprint of that dazzling sun is

still before your mind's eye. But, down the mountain they go - to the rest of the disciples and to the world.

Which makes me ask what about the other disciples? What about Andrew, Phillip, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alpheus, Thaddeaus, Simon, Judas, and Bartholomew? What about those nine disciples who were left in ordinary life at the foot of the mountain while this wonderful experience took place out of their sight and out of their reach? Personally, as I thought about those disciples, I furrowed my brow. I got a little grouchy. I could relate to THEM. Why couldn't THEY see Moses and Elijah? Why couldn't THEY catch a few rays from bright shiny Jesus? What about those of us who don't have mountaintop experiences and spend our time waiting for God in the foothills? Is our faith not strong enough? Sometimes, it would be nice to get a little dose of the transfiguration high just to get us through the next difficult situation or irritating person. Sometimes, it would be nice to have that powerful experience to remember and play over and over again in our brains.

But, not all of us are called to the mountaintop. If you've ever listened to someone else describe their mountaintop prayer life experiences and you felt inadequate, then perhaps you can relate. If you've ever watched someone's eyes fill with tears when they describe what God has done in their lives and you felt cheated, then perhaps you can relate. But, consider this. Nine of 12 disciples stayed behind. When they reunited, they ALL went out to minister together. But, NONE of them were able to heal the very next person who needed it which suggests that the mountaintop experience did not give the 3 any more power than the 9. It did not open anybody's eyes more than anybody else's. And, the women – all of Jesus' women friends – they were not called to the mountaintop. But, they were the only followers who went to the cross to stay with Jesus in his dying moments. And, they went to the garden to meet the resurrected Christ.

Mountaintops are good, and it is nice when you are a part of them, but they are not a measurement for faith and they are not a guaranteed benefit of faith. Maybe that is a compliment. Maybe the 9 did not need the sequins in their eyes to know the glory of God. Maybe the 9 did not need the dazzle to recognize Jesus as a dusty carpenter AND the full revelation of God. Maybe God's glory came to them in a simpler way. That is very good news for those of us still waiting on the ground – God's glory comes in many ways. From the likes of Moses and Elijah, but also from a baby – from earthquakes and fire but also from a still small voice. Listen. Look for the glory right where you are. Look for God shining from the face of the man walking his dog in the park, or the woman stocking up the 2 for 1's at the grocery store, or the teen-ager playing their music too loud or the red-faced driver behind you. Maybe you'll capture a glimpse of God's grace like you've never seen before. Maybe not. But, keep listening. Even if you can't relate, you might find a God who relates to you.