

Just Look Around

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Luke 9:28-43a

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Transfiguration Sunday



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Luke 9:28-36

²⁸Now about eight days after these sayings [which Jesus spoke to them at the base of the mountain he] took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. ²⁹And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³⁰Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. ³¹They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. ³²Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ³³Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” — not knowing what he said. ³⁴While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. ³⁵Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!” ³⁶When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.



One of the most comfortable places in my childhood world – a pre-seatbelt-law, pre-airbag world, that is – was being on summer vacation, riding in the back of a station wagon, surrounded by luggage and an ice chest and sleeping bags with just enough room to lay down with a pillow, some car games, a coloring book and crayons.

It was the back of a copper, 1967 Rambler Rebel station wagon that was that cocoon for me one summer when my parents took us to New England where we made our way through the usual tourist sites. As we approached Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, the highest peak in the northeastern United States, I was comfortably asleep in that nest in the back of that car.

We got to the top of the mountain just as I was waking up. There were loud noises and yellow flashing lights and orange signs outside the windows – we had entered a construction zone. As I sat up I couldn't see the road very clearly, or anything else for that matter, because of the fog.

“Where are we dad?,” I asked as I rubbed my eyes, “I can't see anything. It sure is foggy.”

“We're on top of Mt. Washington,” my dad said, which didn't really mean very much to a little kid who was still have asleep. “And that's not fog,” dad said, “we're in a cloud.”

Now *that* got my attention! I remember clearly how he said it — so matter-of-factly, “We're in a cloud.” We're on top of a mountain, *in a cloud*, with orange and yellow light bouncing off the white, billowy puffs just outside the car windows. It's a surreal vision for me as I look back on it even now — that calm summer afternoon of my childhood. It was so awesome up there in the clouds on that mountain that that image is what pops into my head whenever I hear the words “mountaintop”.

Whenever I hear Martin Luther King, Jr. say that he'd “been to the mountaintop”, I always wonder if he saw clouds and yellow and orange flashing warning lights when he got there. When Moses went to the mountaintop he saw “the glory of the Lord” and a “cloud covered the mountain for 6 days,” Exodus tells us. The Israelites thought the mountain was being consumed by a fire, yet Moses spent 40 days up there before finally coming back down with God's commandments. I've always wondered if Moses saw the clouds and the yellow and orange lights.

And I also wonder what it was that Peter and John and James saw up there on the mountaintop with Jesus. The Transfiguration, we call it, the transforming of Jesus before their eyes. Mark's Gospel says they saw the appearance of Jesus' face change as he prayed, they saw his clothes become dazzling white, they saw Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus. Did they see the yellow and

orange bouncing off the clouds? Did they see what I saw? Did they see what Brother Martin saw? Or what Moses saw?

Whatever it was that they saw, it confused them. They were sleepy but rubbed their eyes and stayed awake long enough to see this vision. Peter thought it was so great that he wanted to set up some tents and spend some time there, to enjoy the experience a little longer I suppose. And then while they were still trying to sort out what was going on, they found themselves in a cloud up on that mountain and it scared them. And then a voice from the cloud spoke to them, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” And then they were alone with Jesus again and they told no one about it until much later.

On the mountaintop with Peter and James and John. On the mountaintop with Jesus and Moses and Elijah. On the mountaintop with mom and dad in that ‘67 Rambler. Clouds, lights, mystery, awe. It’s quite a place up there on the mountain.

You’ve been there too – I know you have. Mountaintops take different shape for different people. Sometimes mountaintops are in places where one experiences some great spiritual uplift. Sometimes mountaintops are in hospital rooms or living rooms or worship services. Sometimes you’ll find a mountaintop in a homeless shelter or a soup kitchen, sometimes in the room where a child is born or a parent dies.

Mountaintops take different form in different lives — you probably know where one is for you. One of those places where you feel like something mystical has happened, where your vision seems changed somehow, where you are in the clouds and it’s beautiful or terrifying or touching and you’re not quite sure how to react.

One of the problems with any mountaintop is that the clouds can get in your way. You find yourself on that mountaintop and your nose is smack in the middle of a cloud, you can see nothing to the left, nothing to the right, lucky if you can see your hand in front

of your face. And the temptation on the top of any mountain in some kind of cloud is to not even try to take in the whole view. The temptation is to allow yourself to be so overcome by the experience in and of itself that you miss the fullness of what’s going on.

I sat up from my little cocoon in the back of my parents’ station wagon, rubbed my eyes, and saw only fog blocking my vision, stopping me from seeing where we were or what was going on. Yet all around us that day was “the glory of God” — the clouds had met the mountain and we were in the middle of it. Perhaps it was the face of God glowing orange and yellow, maybe it was the breath of God billowing in those white puffs around the car, maybe it was the voice of God speaking to me through my parents, “We’re in a cloud.” The experience itself had such an impact on me that 40+ years later I can still see it clearly in my mind. Yet somehow that’s all it has been for me, a childhood vacation memory. The clouds got in the way and I could see nothing else.

And so it was also with Peter and James and John up there in what they thought was a bit of a vacation away from the bustle of Jesus’ ministry. The clouds were so close that they failed to see past them. They were in the presence of God with Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus about his final days — and all they wanted to do was stay there to soak it in. They seem preoccupied with the details of the mountaintop experience, seeing nothing beyond the particular moment that they were in, unable to see anything more than their hand in front of their face.

They fit what Thomas Carlyle says of our ability to understand that which we call mystical. “No [one] sees far;” says Carlyle, “the most see no farther than their noses.” The moment was right at the end of their noses — and that’s all they saw.

But clearly that was not the Jesus-message that they had been hearing while they followed him around Galilee those few years. Jesus had tried to get them to look past their noses, past the cloud of individual mountaintop experiences. He tried to get them to

change their perspective, expand their senses; to look at others who no one else cared about, to touch the unclean, to listen to God speaking in their ears, to taste each other's presence, and pull in closer those who needed more love. But they came off that mountaintop after that mystical experience *unchanged*, they headed for Jerusalem with Jesus still in a fog to what that journey truly meant for him, and they told no one about the experience. What had they seen, what did they learn, where were they headed, who was this Jesus?

One Saturday morning a few years ago I discovered a something about my own sense of the mountaintop that I never knew existed. I was asked to hang posters around my neighborhood for a music festival being sponsored by local churches. I was living in Germantown, an at-risk neighborhood in Northwest Philadelphia, a neighborhood which often gets negative attention – and this concert was a way for churches to say, “Hey out there! Don’t pay so much attention to the negative media images that the city gets. It’s not such a bad place and, in fact, has a lot to offer.” We started out at Dunkin’ Donuts, always a great place to begin any mountaintop experience, and then we headed out to hit some strategic spots to hang our posters.

The first place I walked into was a neighborhood corner store, recently painted bright pink, a grand opening banner hanging from the doorway, a store that could have been on the set of any episode of *Law & Order* as the site of a shootout between gang members and the owner. I walked into the store through the crowded shelves of cans and boxes as Latin music played from a boom box. I handed the poster to a young woman behind the counter and explained what it was about and with a hint of an Hispanic accent she said, “I’ll hang it up for you.” It wasn’t some Hollywood set – a tiny, Hispanic grocery store on a city corner – it was just 3 blocks from my house.

And so my mountaintop experience began that day. As I walked into probably 10 beauty salons and 5 sneaker stores, a half-dozen dollar stores, and several small restaurants I met people who

were making a living in my neighborhood. And most were very willing to take a poster. I walked into places where people said “Oh, great! This sounds like fun! I’ll be there.” or “What is it? A concert at the High School. Oh, sure. Hang it in the window.”

I walked down the commercial district’s avenue toward an X-rated video store and chuckled to myself because I thought the two guys standing out front were going to give me a discount coupon when they offered me a Bible instead and a brochure about their church across the street in some rented space above the stores. “No thanks,” I said, “I have a church already. I don’t have a brochure to give you but could you hang this poster in your church?” We laughed a little together, talked about the challenges of church-life in an urban setting.

I met people with dark skin and light skin and pale skin. I met men and women, straight and gay. I met young people and old people. I met people new to the neighborhood and people who have had businesses there for 40 years and I met people just trying to get by each day.

I realized as I walked the streets that day that it was some sort of a mountaintop experience — just like Peter and James and John up there with Jesus. Was it a mystical experience? Is it possible to have a mystical experience hanging posters in stores in a typical Philadelphia neighborhood? Albert Schweitzer’s says that “Any profound view of the world is mysticism,” said Schweitzer, “in that it brings [us] into a spiritual relation with the Infinite.” So maybe it was mystical.

I could have very easily just looked straight ahead as I made my way from store to store seeing only the hand in front of my face. I realize that I could have gone through that morning without even smiling at anyone that I passed on the street because I had my mission to carry out and nothing was going to get in my way. Yet my view of the world changed slightly that morning. Maybe I don’t have a “profound view of the world” like Albert Schweitzer was talking about but something became different

for me.

Something was “transfigured” for me that day.

I turned my head that Saturday morning — I looked left and right, behind me and in front of me. I looked into the eyes of my neighbors and those that I often bump past in the grocery store as I complain about the crowds. And I met people who had been beyond my tunnel vision — and it was transforming.

I learned something about myself that day – something about all of us I suspect. It’s easy to live in our own narrow worlds, lost in our clouds, holding onto our comfortable tunnel vision view. It’s easy to drive to church and home again without ever looking side to side. But what might happen if you had a mountaintop experience in your own neighborhood – any neighborhood? Imagine what could happen if you saw beyond your clouded vision in Havertown or Drexel Hill or Upper Darby and treated it like a mountaintop experience of mystical proportions?

The mountaintop must be mystical to be of any value to you – wherever and whatever that mountaintop might be for you – it must give you a chance to connect with God in a new way, to connect with other human beings in a new way. A mountaintop experience is not mystical unless it leads you to look beyond being lost in a cloud and allows you to just look around.

“One of the great paradoxes of the mystical life is this:,” wrote Thomas Merton, “that a man cannot enter into the deepest centre of himself and pass through that centre into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love.”

I’m not sure Peter and James and John made that move toward selfless love as they came down off that mountain. Their eyes were tunnel-visioned toward their own self-interests. They refused to let Jesus’ transfiguration transfigure them and change their understanding of who Jesus was, what he was doing here with us,

and what God had intended for us to know through him.

I’m not quite sure I fully understand what happened to me on that poster hanging mission through my neighborhood, but I do know that it forced me to turn my head and look around. And I know that I have never again been able to walk or drive through any community where I have lived simply looking straight ahead or with my eyes toward the ground. Because of that visit to the mountaintop I now know that the risk is too great that I might miss those who are struggling right there along side of me, that I might miss making a new friend, that I might miss the presence of God if it’s outside the cloud which surrounds my life.

I now know that a mountaintop experience could be simply a momentary event instead of a chance at a mystical vision. Just maybe that seemingly innocuous event was God’s offer of a mountaintop, mystical, transfiguring, meet-my-neighbor-on-the-street experience the likes of which I had never seen before.

Yesterday I was on my way to play hero-dad and dig Lacey’s car out of a snow bank where she had landed it early that day. As I drove past the church I saw a car parked in the lot with its hood propped open so I stopped and asked if the man was okay. His battery had died, he needed a jump start, I had no jumper cables (I gave mine to my son Tim in another act of hero-dad work), and despite a few calls I wasn’t able to find any. And the, out of church doors popped Karen – not just our organist but the owner of a brand new set of jumpers in her trunk! And there we were, three of us on the mountaintop, meeting each other face-to-face, taking care of a typical task on a cold afternoon, connecting with each other in new ways and, who knows, maybe life-changing ways. That’s the point here – that’s the danger of tunnel vision in this world. If you fail to look around on the mountain that surrounds us, you have no idea what moments – typical and mundane or momentous and life-altering – you have overlooked.

Right there in front of my nose on that Saturday years ago was the mountaintop where God could change me, turn my head, make me look around and take a chance. Or maybe even right there yesterday in reaching out to a neighbor – a moment I could have easily missed if I focused straight ahead.

As we journey now into Lent, we need to pay attention to the mountaintops that appear in our lives. Let them be events that make us turn our heads and look around. Let them be opportunities to not stare blankly straight ahead lost in a cloud, but to take the risk and look around – and be transfigured.

Amen.