

**"MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS"--a sermon by Gary R. Hindman,
FPCUC. Scripture: Mark 9:2-9.**

Text: "As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead." --Mark 9:9

San Diego is now the 7th largest city in the United States. Anyone who has been there knows it is a beautiful, friendly city, bursting with promise...and population! Many of the residents think it is big enough which is why, for some time now, no small number of the citizens of San Diego have made use of bumper stickers on their cars which say: "Enjoy San Diego. Then go home!"

This not-so-subtle hint by residents of San Diego is a reminder of one of the underlying messages in today's Gospel lesson which goes something like this: "Enjoy the mountain. Then go home!"

I like to think of the Christian life as consisting in two dimensions: the mountain of exultation and the valley of service.

The mountain goes by many names--it can be a personal retreat, it can be a marriage encounter weekend, it can be an Emmaus Walk such as is being experienced this week by our church friends Todd Cadwallader-Olsker and Don Eddy; it can be worship at the church or a plunge into quiet meditation, perusing a wonderful Christian book; it could be going to the theatre and seeing *The Tales of Narnia*; or perhaps a study of the Scriptures or an inspiring moment with God and nature. The mountain is where we encounter God, refresh our souls, and find new motivation for living.

Then there is the valley. The valley is where we live on a daily basis. The valley is where we maintain our responsibilities. The valley is where we seek to be the body of Christ at work in the world. The valley is where we serve others and offer love and concern in the name of humanity and in the name of Jesus Christ. The Christian life is lived in both dimensions--mountain and valley.

Sometimes, mountain and valley come together when we learn to appreciate the blessings of God.

There was once a geography class who took an imaginary tour of the earth. They looked at the great sights of the ancient and modern world and at the end of the semester, they were asked to list what they considered to be the Seven Wonders of the World. Their favorites included the Great Pyramid of Egypt, the Taj Mahal of India, the Grand Canyon, the Panama Canal, the Empire State Building, St. Peter's Basilica and the Great Wall of China.

As the teacher tabulated the votes she noticed one little girl had not turned in a list and asked her why. "Well, there are so many things to list," said the little girl, "that I couldn't

make up my mind." "Well, tell us what you have, anyway," said the teacher. Reluctantly the little good stood up and began to read her list of the seven wonders of the world. To her they were to touch, to taste, to see, to hear, to run, to laugh and to love. Is there a better list than these?

There is a hunger in the human heart for an experience of the mountaintop. So when Jesus took Peter, James and John to the "Mount of Transfiguration" they were thrilled. They were flattered that Jesus asked them and not the others; they were pleased to spend personal time with him; they were awed when he was transfigured and his clothing became dazzling white; and they were thrilled when they saw Jesus in the company of Moses and Elijah. In fact, they wanted to capture the moment and just linger there. Peter even said, "I will make three booths here, one for (Jesus), one for Moses, and one for Elijah." I'm sure Peter felt closer to God at that moment than he had ever felt in his life and he wanted to hold tightly to those good feelings. You can't really blame him!

We all need to go to the mountain top from time to time. It is there that Moses, in his day, received a vision of the promise of Israel--that God would be their God, they would be God's people, and that they would be blessed under God's law in the promised land.

There is a Presbytery in Western Iowa called "Prospect Hill." It received its name from a great spiritual experience that occurred in the 19th century. The great Presbyterian missionary Sheldon Jackson and two others ascended a hill overlooking the Missouri River and, looking out in a westerly direction they received a vision from God that he, Jackson, should go forth and "spiritualize the West."

In time Jackson would found scores of churches from Iowa to Alaska and he would make thousands of converts in the name of Christ. But what if Jackson had stayed on Prospect Hill. No new churches would have been formed. What if Moses had stayed on Mt. Sinai, or Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration? We yearn for the mountain of exultation, but we are called to the valley of service.

There's a classic story about Albert Einstein, whose genius in Mathematics and Physics made some people think he was qualified in a vast array of other areas. They often sought him out for advice entirely out of his field. One most unusual request came from a distraught mother who wrote: "Dear Dr. Einstein: My son thinks he is Jesus Christ. I write to ask if you can talk to him. For no one else will he come down from the mountain, and he has been there for three weeks. Will you do this for a broken-hearted mother?"

Einstein agreed to talk to the mother's son. And he did come down from the mountain of his delusion. Einstein later explained to some of his friends: "I didn't argue with his delusions. Rather I reminded him that Jesus came down from the mountain to become a fisher among men."

I always like to read the story of "The Transfiguration" by including the succeeding verses in the passage. Notice that as soon as they came down from their religious retreat Jesus was bombarded by urgent human need: "And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and kneeling before him said, 'Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and he suffers terribly....'" (Matt 17:14, 15a) Jesus came down from the mountain of exultation into the valley of service.

From the mountain, from the place of vision, we can step back and get the bigger picture; we can see it as God sees it--as a place of need. In fact from mountain to valley is a paradigm of the life of Christ who left the glory of God for the stable of humility and self-giving love. Paul says it this way: "Christ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Phil 2:5-8)

A missionary who served for years in a remote region of New Guinea was interviewed upon his return home. "What did you find there?" he was asked.

"I found chaos and degradation," he said. "I found mothers who would abandon their babies for no decent reason; I found sons who, if their father broke his leg, would leave him on the roadside to die. I found a people without compassion."

"What did you do for people like that? Did you preach to them?" the interviewer asked.

"Preach to them! No! I lived. When I saw a forsaken baby crying, I comforted it. When I saw a man with a broken leg, I mended it. When I saw people in distress I took them in. Then the people came to me and asked, 'What does this mean?' And only then did I preach the Gospel.

"Did you succeed?" he asked. "When I left," the missionary said, "I left a church."

That has got to be the test of every mountaintop experience. Does it motivate us to love our neighbor? Does it encourage us to reach out to the down and out? Does it make us more compassionate, more devoted to the cause of service before self? Therefore, the real question is: has the Transfiguration "transfigured" your life?

We go to church to worship and receive the Sacrament and, strengthened, we go forth from worship to a world of need. Without doubt there are people outside these walls that need your love and your witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They may live next door, around the block, or around the world. They may be members of your family or at the desk next to yours in the office or school. You pass them on the way going home, or they may be sitting next to you this morning. I hope this worship service is a blessing to you. But after the benediction I want to send you into the valley of service in the Spirit of the Living Christ.

Let me issue each of you an invisible bumper-sticker this morning. Place it on your car

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as a reminder of our call in Christ. I got the idea from the city of San Diego. It reads:
"Enjoy the mountain. Now go home...and bless someone!" Amen!