

Sermon Text – Sunday, February 27, 2022 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**OT Reading: Exodus 34: 29-35, Epistle Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2,
Gospel Reading for Message: Luke 9:28-43a - Pray**

Although you are familiar with this story, let me set the stage. This comes after Jesus sends out the twelve to “drive out demons and cure disease” in the region (Luke 9:1), Jesus has fed the five thousand through the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and Jesus talks with his disciples about his identity – Peter confesses Jesus as the “Christ” [meaning the Messiah]. Jesus informs his disciples what must happen in the coming weeks. These things all culminate within about a week of what we read this morning from Luke’s Gospel. Jesus’ ministry in Galilee is complete and he now turns toward Jerusalem.

Jesus takes his closest companions with him up onto the mountain to pray. Mountain tops are significant in the scriptures, they stand for the high places where a person could be closer to God, where they could place altars and have dreams. There is a Celtic term “*thin places*” – “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter.” Perhaps that was the purpose for going up on the mountain, maybe too Jesus needed separation from the crowds for his prayer. Of course, that begs the question why take Peter, John, and James with him? Maybe Jesus’ purpose was so finally his closest companions would see his true self.

Whatever his motives, as Jesus was praying, he changed, his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. It is important that Luke reports this as happening while Jesus was praying, not after his time of prayer. And, suddenly, two men appeared in glorious splendor – while Jesus prayed. Luke names these men as Moses and Elijah – Moses the one who received the Law / Torah directly from God, and Elijah a prophet to surpass all prophets. In the Gospels, Luke is the only one to write about their purpose for speaking with Jesus. “They spoke about his departure which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.” The actual word Luke used is “*exodos*” which reminds the reader of Exodus of the Old Testament, also a word that some translate as death [a departure from the physical world]. Maybe they were giving Jesus’ encouragement, maybe they were an answer to Jesus’ prayer – knowing what was in his future Jesus needed some help with doubt. Don’t you think it possible that the humanity within Jesus caused doubt and anxiety – conditions that prayer can work to resolve.

It's important too that Peter, John, and James were witnesses to these things, they saw Jesus’ illuminating glory, they witnessed the two messengers –

how they knew it was Moses and Elijah who knows maybe it was intuition. I am sure that this caused fear, anxiety, and confusion among the three disciples. How can this be, what are we seeing – is this a hallucination? So, not knowing what was going on or how to respond Peter does the only thing he knows to do he offers to build a resting place for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. However, no sooner does he mention that idea then a cloud encompasses the group, and a loud voice speaks to them, naming Jesus as the Son, the Chosen One and commanding the disciples to “listen to him.” And, just like that, Jesus was alone, the divine experience had passed. They spoke to no one about what had happened on that mountain top.

But the story does not end there – it could be enough to just speak about this encounter with the divine, but they had to come down off the mountain at some point. Back to the level plain where Jesus again met the crowds. A man with a demon-possessed son, whom the other disciples could not free, confronts Jesus – although Jesus had given the disciples the authority to cast out demons. Jesus responds to this man by saying, “O unbelieving and perverse generation how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here.” Does that sound to you a little bit like Jesus lost his patience? Or maybe I am misunderstanding Jesus’ intentions, we do that sometimes – take things said in a way different from the speaker’s intention. But I wonder how it would feel, having just had a divine experience of speaking with Moses and Elijah, and then suddenly thrust back into reality. I don’t know about you, but I might be slightly annoyed to be so quickly pulled away from that ‘mountaintop’ experience. Jesus might be ready to put Galilee behind him, but Jesus’ work is not done, maybe the hardest part is still ahead of him.

Isn’t that true in our lives? We set the stage for a relaxing retreat, we create space for a divine experience, and we expect prayer to deliver us from the mundane. This is what Jesus did intentionally creating a space to meet the divine. It is a valid practice for us to prepare spaces for quiet and peaceful prayer. And there is a lot we can say about doing those things that enable us to meet God’s divine presence. When we think about what this scripture means for our lives, we can consider doing what Jesus does so often – creating space to meet the divine.

Do we do that in our lives? You know, our lives can be frustrating journeys, people don’t always act as we expect or desire. Sometimes our wants exceed our needs, and our needs exceed our abilities. In this scripture from Luke, you can see Jesus’ journey going from divine glory to the frustration of reality in a broken world. That frustration exists today. We design our worship experiences to create a feeling of God’s presence, a sacred space and we leave worship at times feeling uplifted, but then we get to our vehicles and the darn car won’t start, or the kids start arguing in the back seat, or it’s raining, and we forgot our umbrellas,

or someone brings their demon-possessed son for healing. Exit divine sacredness and enter the mundane things of everyday life.

Do we only experience the divine in those 'mountain top' spaces or is it possible to experience the divine even in the valley lows, even in the mundane things of everyday life? I think it is possible, but I think it involves doing what Jesus did – pray. Prayer changes us, transforms us into people seeking the presence of God. To quote a theology professor, “praying makes you want what God wants.” When we pray, we change to a mindset that seeks God’s will.

In this scripture, not only do we see Jesus saying prayers, but we also see Jesus doing prayer. Acting out his relationship with God as he lives his life, doing prayer in the mundane things of everyday life. Jesus heals and comforts those in his company. “Mitzvah” is a Hebrew term which loosely means a good work – this is part of prayer life. When we feed the hungry by giving to the food pantries, when we help a neighbor shoveling snow, when we work for a neighborhood clean – that is mitzvah and can be prayer that honors God and neighbor.

When Jesus, and the other three, came down off that mountain top they did in fact come back to reality. Jesus knew that these experiences didn’t last forever – which may be why he didn’t respond to Peter’s statement about building shelters. Peter however wanted to hold on to that divine experience and maybe the thought of building shelters was born out of a desire to set up a shrine to memorialize the moment. We too have our shrines, to Jesus’ birth and Jesus’ death. Shrines that remind us of the divine.

But the thing is, very few of us can remain on that mountain top in that divine state. Sooner or later, we must ‘come down’ and face the realities of daily living. And when we do, even though those divine experiences change us, the world is still the same. Evil exists and the fathers of demon-possessed children will symbolically confront us. That is where many of us become frustrated and fatigued. If we only look at divine experience as those ‘mountain top’ moments, then we are missing something great.

Jesus was able to create an astonishing revelation of God’s glory even while casting out demons. Jesus actions were prayers that brought glory to his father – our God. Jesus had developed practical spiritual prayer practices that brought him closer to God but Jesus also “put legs” on his prayers by doing his father’s will. Those were things Jesus taught his disciples to do and what Jesus’ teachings compel us to do as well.

How are we letting our prayer practices change us – transform us the way Jesus was transformed in prayer? Are we setting aside time to be completely immersed in our “conversations with God”? Is there space for you to hear God’s responses? Some people think that God’s responses are limited to “Yes, No, or

Maybe” and I wonder if God is so rigid. When I look at creation, I get a sense that there is more to it, sometimes God may respond with startling revelations of the gifts that lay hidden in ourselves. I know that is the response I have received from God. If we listen God may be telling us that we have the strength through faith to do anything.

God may be telling us through the mundane everyday things that come into our lives that we are able to handle it. We can be more like Jesus in the way we approach the ‘valley lows’ that might leave us frustrated – do prayer as much as speaking prayer. We see that in Jesus’ actions, not only did Jesus’ retreat to the mountain top for those divine experiences but also because what Jesus did was to bring glory to God – he “did” prayer.

Do prayer as you treat each other with compassion and mercy. Do prayer as you visit a friend who may be lonely. Do prayer as you walk through the park and enjoy God’s creation. Every time you acknowledge creation, you have prayed. You are doing prayer as you plant seeds and appreciate how they change and grow. You can do prayer even while cooking a meal as you think about the food you fix and appreciate the taste and the fellowship of the people you share that meal with. The first step in doing prayer is making your activity *intentional* and *consecrated*. This means that you decide beforehand what you’re doing and that you will commit a sacred act dedicated to God.

Here's a mantra we can use to put us in the right mindset for ‘doing’ prayer, from the hymn “God Be in My Head”

God be in my head, and in my understanding;

God be in my eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;

God be in my heart, and in my thinking;

God be at my end, and at my departing.

The hard things, mundane everyday things, might become easier if we did prayer more often.