Coming Back Down the Mountain

Matthew 17:1-9

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One of my favorite places in the world is Acadia National Park on Mt. Desert Island. There are places there where granite mountains come right down to the ocean. It’s so beautiful there; it’s almost larger than life.

One of the special places in Acadia is Cadillac Mountain. From the top of that mountain you can see one whole side of the island, looking down on the harbor, the little islands that dot the bay. On the west side of the mountain is an area called sunset point. It looks out over Blue Hill and Deer Isle and it’s one of the few places in Maine that you can look west and watch the sunset over the ocean.

I was there one evening about a half hour before sunset. People were roaming around with cameras, chatting, eating, playing Frisbee. And then as the sun started to go down, people began to find a good spot to sit and watch the sunset. Everyone made their way to some ideal spot with a good view. I chatted with several tourists about where they were from and small talk like that. Then the sun reached that point on the horizon that filled the sky with all the vivid colors a sunset has to offer. Everyone got quiet. For the next few moments all those strangers sat in silent awe of the beautiful sunset over the ocean, surrounded by granite mountains and pine forests. No one spoke. For several minutes we were a congregation of strangers, in silent reverie, sharing the experience of witnessing some of God’s finest work.

And then it happened as it always does, that the sun dropped beneath the horizon and the colors faded to dark blues and grays. Everyone got up, a little dazed by the experience. For a brief moment, the whole world looked beautiful and peaceful, even holy, and then it was over. We were no longer a congregation of strangers, in awe of God’s creation, but a group of tourists returning to our cars, to drive back down the mountain.

I drove back down into Bar Harbor where people were going about their business as usual, completely unaware of the holy event that had just taken place on Cadillac Mountain.

The next day I overheard a tourist saying to a store clerk, “God sure did nice work up here.” The store clerk never looked up, but just said, “Shoulda seen it when He had it by himself.”
The story we heard today from Matthew’s gospel is called the Transfiguration. Jesus was going up a mountain to pray, which he often did. This time he asked Peter, James and John to go with him. They already knew that Jesus was sent by God, for they had witnessed miracles and healings. They knew that Jesus was an exceptional person, but this experience was beyond anything they had seen. Before their eyes Jesus was transformed into the likeness of light. In the Greek language, the word is metamorphosis, a complete change of one thing into another, like a caterpillar into a butterfly.

Peter, James and John saw for themselves that Jesus was not only an extraordinary human being; he was divine. They witnessed this beatific vision, which must have been even more beautiful than a sunset on Cadillac Mountain. They saw Jesus and Moses and Elijah, all luminous with God’s presence. Peter, James and John wanted the moment to last forever and offered to build shelters for the three holy men. They wanted to move right into those shelters and stay there a long time. But just like the sunset, the moment ended and Jesus was just the same as he had always been…human.

I hope that all of you have had experiences that you could call “mountain top” experiences. They come in moments, and then the moment is gone. It may have been in some beautiful natural setting, or it may have been something as simple as looking at a baby, moments when you felt you were in the presence of something greater than yourself. You may even have had moments like that in this very room, like on a Christmas Eve, or an Easter morning, when you saw with your own eyes…something powerful…and it gave you that sense of awe…that there were no words to express. Those are wonderful moments, that we would like to hang on to, but they’re out of our control. They pass and we have to come down from the mountain. As much as we would like to stay in those lofty places, we can’t live there. We have to come back to our real lives, maybe a little bit changed by the experience, but we have to live back down here, not on the mountain top.

Jesus could have stayed up on those lofty heights with Moses and Elijah, but he chose to come back down and live among ordinary people. He could have had a much easier life up on the mountain top, in the company of saints and angels, but he chose to come back down to live with us ordinary people, teaching and healing, feeding people and changing lives. Jesus could not have done that work from the mountain top.
If you sometimes feel out of touch with God, maybe a trip to a mountainside would be a good idea. Follow Jesus’ example of going to a quiet, natural place. Surrounded by God’s creation, try talking to God about what’s going on in your life. Of course if you go up a mountain in Maine in the winter you ought to have skis on. There are lots of people who find it easier to be with God in nature, rather than in church. I’ve heard them called “outdoor Baptists”; they feel like they’re in church when they’re outside.

I’m not suggesting that we stop meeting in churches and all go to Bradbury Mountain. I’m suggesting to people who go to church that it can be part of your spiritual life to walk on a beach or climb a mountain or walk in the woods. Those places have something to offer us that we cannot experience here.

For those people who tell me they would rather talk to God in nature than in church, I would give a different message. I might tell them the story of a minister who went to visit an old man, a crusty old Mainer who said he didn’t need church. The minister came to visit and sat with him in front of the fireplace, not saying a word. After a long silence the minister picked up the fireplace poker and poked one glowing coal from the fire. They watched that single, glowing coal, apart from the fire. They watched in silence as that brightly burning coal glowed and then faded and then went out altogether and became cold.

The old man looked at the minister and said, “I’ll be in church next Sunday”.

Hopefully in this room, there will be moments when we are caught up in something greater than ourselves. There will be moments of beautiful music, words of hope and heartfelt prayer. Then will come the “go in peace” and it will be time to get on with other things. This beautiful room exists to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to eat at his table. But we are not meant to live here. We are meant for lives of joy and service, out there. Amen.