

“You Had to Be There”

Sermon – February 23, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

There we were at the top. I looked around and was awestruck.

On the way driving to Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico from

Trotwood, Ohio in July of 1973 when I was 14 years old, my Boy Scout troop stopped in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Among other things we took an excursion up Pikes Peak. Though we would

be backpacking the Sangre de Cristo mountains in New Mexico on this day we rode in stretch limousines to the top of the mountain.

They said it was because those vehicles worked best in the rarefied atmosphere at 14,000 feet as opposed to buses.

Coming from relatively flat Ohio, I didn't see mountains regularly. When we got to the top and got out, there was a stiff cold wind. But that I forgot that momentarily when I looked out and saw the 360-degree panorama of the landscape.

While it was overcast, the scenery was gorgeous and overwhelmed my eyes.

I wanted to capture the moment and so pulled out my trusty Kodak Pocket Instamatic camera [*show slide*] and took pictures all the way around [*spin around*].

A couple of weeks later after we got back and I got the pictures back from the developer. I eagerly opened them up. When I saw the pictures from Pikes Peak I was—crestfallen. They just looked like some far off snippets of scenery on 4x6 cards.

Even today with better cameras, you still get something like this: [*show slide*]. I mean it's nice, but you really don't get the full “picture.” And as much as I could describe it to you, you just can't truly experience it the way I did.

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Now I’m sure each of you have had similar experiences. Things that any description, photo, or video is just a pale imitation of actually being there and any retelling just falls flat. *[Change slide]*

Today’s scripture passages are just those kinds of experiences. Though much more fantastic than mine, they also took place on mountaintops.

Moses goes the mountaintop several times in the book of Exodus. In fact, it’s hard to count because the number of going ups doesn’t match the number coming down.

Today’s passage, told so well by Donna, has God inviting Moses up the mountain to receive the law written on stone, principally the Ten Commandments.

Echoing the length of Creation, Moses sits on mountain covered by a cloud for six days and on the seventh day, out of the cloud, God calls Moses. And echoing the duration of the Flood before there is new life, Moses is on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights receiving instruction in the Law. These numbers are more symbolic than literal, but still they convey the idea of a long time. Can you imagine that your sitting on mountain New Year’s Eve and for a week you are just getting prepared mentally, emotionally, and spiritually? Then you go into the cloud with God and are there until today?

That is inconceivable in today’s culture. On Thursday I “listened” in on three conference calls simultaneously! And that there is symptomatic of the problem today. We simply are trying to do too much multi-tasking and only read or listen to taglines and sound bites. We rarely,

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if ever, take even 40 *minutes* to study and reflect on one topic.

Forty days, even forty hours, is inconceivable.

But at least when Moses came down the mountain, he may not have been able to describe what he experienced, but he could say, “Look, I brought you these stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them.” Of course, he was then so incense that they had been partying too irreverently that he threw down the tablets, breaking them, and had to go back up the mountain to get new ones.

The gospel and epistle lesson are about a more ephemeral experience—the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Six days after Peter proclaims Jesus is the Messiah and then Jesus calls Peter “Satan” for protesting that Jesus must be crucified, Jesus take Peter, James, and John up a mountain.

And there Jesus “metamorphosises” (the Greek word for it) so that he is glowing like the sun.

Then Moses and Elijah appear and talk with him. Then either out of respect or wanting to capture and keep the moment, Peter offers to build booths—or “tabernacles”—for them.

Before he can finish speaking a white cloud, perhaps similar to the one Moses entered, overshadows them. A voice, presumably God’s, says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!”

The disciples fall to the ground overcome by fear, but Jesus comes and puts a gentle hand on them and says, “Get up. Don’t be afraid.” Then they see it is just them and Jesus again.

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Then they go down the mountain and Jesus orders them to tell no one what they experienced until after the Resurrection.

And they do “Listen to him”—on at least this point—and don’t share the experience.

Outside the Gospels, the event is only told in today’s passage from the Second Epistle of Peter. Because it is many decades later, people, particularly those outside the faith, are questioning this whole Jesus movement as based on “cleverly devised myths” seeking to control people, like in a cult. Everyone was expecting Jesus back in their lifetimes and it wasn’t happening; they are skeptical of the “Parousia,” [puh-ROO-zee-uh] a Greek word meaning “coming”, as in the Second Coming [*show slide*].

The writer of II Peter says essentially, “Look, not only were we with Jesus during his ministry and death and resurrection, but we were there on the mountain in the glory of God and we heard ourselves directly from God that Jesus is God’s son. We saw Jesus, talking with Moses and Elijah, as the fulfilment of the Torah—the Law, represented by Moses, and the Prophets, represented by Elijah.”

Today’s passage then says, “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”

It is not really our volition that lets us believe—it is being open and letting the Holy Spirit guide us.

Martin Luther captures a similar sentiment in his Small Catechism remarks on the Spirit:

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“I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel...”

Our faith comes from *allowing* Spirit to come into us and lead us and to let us prophesize—speak the word of God.

Today’s passage then concludes with

“You show by your actions, not your words; people see God, our relationship, in us and our behavior.”

And that is the key part of being a follower of Jesus. Because while that Greek word parousia does mean “coming” as in Jesus coming a second time, Parousia also mean “presence.” So, Jesus is both coming and is present with us now through the Holy Spirit, a concept we discuss during Advent as well.

Because being a Christian, a follower of Jesus, does not mean waiting around for Parousia [*show slide*] or just wanting to be saved. It means showing the presence of Jesus through you. People only see God through you as led by the Spirit.

So, if we want people to come to Jesus, we have to show them what that looks like. If we hate, discriminate, refuse to help those in need, or support those who do, particularly in the name of God, then that is what people see is being a Christian.

But if we reach out, show compassion, and build community, moved by the Spirit of God working in us, then people can see the glory of God in us.

Today we close the 40-day season of Epiphany, the manifestation of Jesus, with the mountaintop experience of the Transfiguration and now turn

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the corner into the forty-day season of Lent, reflecting and repenting on what we are to do with that Epiphany and preparing for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And let us do so, opening ourselves to God’s presence and showing his love by our good works, so when people see us and ask us how they can experience that, you say [*show slide*], “Come—you have to be there.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.