

“Mountaintop Experience”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

February 14, 2021 – Transfiguration Sunday

2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

Who is your hero? Perhaps Oprah Winfrey, Tom Brady, or Greta Thunberg? Some of mine are George Washington, Rosa Parks, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, and Rev. Mr. Fred Rogers.

Like so many heroic figures throughout time, what made these people great, and what makes their example worthy of following, was not their status at birth, the wealth they amassed, or their ability to manipulate others for their own gain. Rather, they were heroes because they faced and overcame great challenges or acted boldly to struggle against systems of injustice and exclusion of others.

I’m sure that Jesus had similarly great heroes, too, and Moses and Elijah were probably right at the top of his list. They were, after all, the great ones of Judaism--Israel’s all-stars.

Consider heroic Moses. He was born in the land of Egypt as an enslaved foreigner, and although he was raised in the Pharaoh’s household, he became an outcast after killing an Egyptian slave driver. Sometime later, after Pharaoh had died and Moses had a run-in with God who spoke to him from a burning bush, he was given the assignment of returning to Egypt to be God’s spokesman. He was to tell the new king to set the Hebrew slaves free (you can imagine how the leader of the Egyptian Empire would respond to that message). To make matters more difficult,

Moses was a terrible speaker, and so God's spokesman needed a spokesman of his own, his brother Aaron, to provide the message.

As you might expect, the king would hear none of Moses' requests to set the Israelites free. Moses kept at it though, and after a series of accompanying plagues, Pharaoh agreed to let the people go, but only to again change his mind shortly after Moses had left with his people to escape from Egypt through the desert. It certainly looked as though the army of the king would catch the Israelites and enslave them once more. But God, once again, helped Moses to rise to the challenge, opening up a great sea for him and his people to travel through to safety and freedom, while closing it up on their pursuers.

And that's when Moses' real challenges began. He had to lead these Tribes of Israel through a foreign, desert land and somehow find them food, water, and shelter. He had to give them rules to govern their behavior as a people and he had to help this huge family stick together. For 40 years, these folks grumbled about their situation, and cried out for Moses to lead them back to Egypt, where they would be slaves once more, but slaves with food and without the responsibility of managing their own lives in a hostile land. And yet to the end of his days, steadfast Moses carried on, lovingly leading the children of Israel towards the promised land and putting up with their many shenanigans all along the way.

And how about heroic Elijah? He was another spokesman of God, living many years after Moses, after the people had established themselves in the land of Palestine. In Elijah's time, many folks had forgotten the teachings of Moses and had ceased to follow the law that was given to their ancestors while they were in the

desert. Wickedness and impurity were the common way of the people and their leaders, and so God sent Elijah to remind them that their God was the unseen but living God, the God of Moses and their ancestors, and they were not to worship this God alone, not statues of wood or other lifeless, false gods. And just as Pharaoh didn't want to hear God's message from Moses back in his day, the King of Israel, his people, and their religious leaders did not want to hear it from Elijah in his day.

The message of Elijah was unwelcome and he faced hostility because of it. He had to flee from the land to avoid being killed, and he ended up, like Moses before him, living in the wilderness and surviving there only by the grace of God. Even then, he continued to trust God for sustenance and remained persistent in proclaiming his message for the people to return to God's ways. To the end of his days, when that fiery chariot took him up to the sky, Elijah stood fast as a witness of the true God's power and provision, and steadfastly spoke truth to the nation's king and religious establishment.

Elijah and Moses were great heroes, and they were so because they faced great challenges and met them head on rather than seeing difficulties and then running the other way. They chose to do what was good and right over that which brought them comfort or gain, and their sacrifice and steadfast faithfulness brought great blessings to many. That is what makes them true heroes.

On the mountain where he was transfigured, Jesus, who by then had also already faced great adversity, was preparing to join Moses and Elijah in being God's spokesman against the powerful. And at that mountaintop moment, he was one with them in

greatness, shining with Moses and Elijah as a heavenly all-star team. But as the great ones do, he stepped away from the moment of glory. He went down off of the mountain, down to the valley where he would face the ultimate challenge of rejection and death. Jesus gave up the moment of glory, the mountaintop experience, so as to take on this ultimate challenge and so to bring eternal goodness to all.

Now, we all experience difficulties of our own. There are challenges at work, home, and school. The future is uncertain and so we worry about losing those things that are important to us-- our jobs, loved ones, homes, and health. Violence and injustice seem to be the way of our world. Truly, every day, as Jesus said, "has enough trouble of its own." Fortunately, we can look to the heroic cast of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus as well as to our other heroes to find inspiration for facing the troubles, great and small, of each day. And just as Jesus' mountaintop experience strengthened him to take on his ultimate challenge, your own mountaintop experiences can prepare you with strength to face the challenges of life in the valleys. And on the mountain, you can hear the voice of God and see with more clarity the valleys and plains below to which you are called to go.

I've experienced this in my own life, as growing up in Colorado, many meaningful spiritual moments in my life occurred while in the mountains. As a youngster, I always looked forward to my church's week-long summer camp in the mountains, as it was at these retreats that I felt truly connected to God and my friends. During one of these mountaintop weeks, when I was 17, I was baptized, and I sensed, for the first time, God calling me into ministry.

Perhaps you, too, feel closer to God or hear God's message more clearly when on the heights. Or perhaps you have other special places or practices that help you feel profoundly aware of God's presence in your life. Perhaps you find yourself in awe of God's grace and beauty when we gather together to worship or when you enjoy quiet moments of reflection and prayer.

All of these places and moments--these mountaintop experiences--are wonderful gifts from God to us, just as they were to Jesus, Elijah, and Moses. But these moments are to be *special* and not ones that cause us to linger and miss out on the struggles and joys of life in the plains and valleys below. Though we, like Peter, may want to pitch a tent on the mountain and hang out there for a while, God calls us to go down and engage in our work in the world, and especially in the low, dark places where the light and love of God need to be shined and justice needs to be enacted. God calls us to be transformed by our mountaintop experiences, filled with Christ's light and love, just so that we can shine in the valleys. And, as Jesus teaches us in the Beatitudes, when you find yourself in a dark valley where you can shine, consider yourself blessed.

So, find inspiration to be strong and courageous from your heroes, great and small; be moved by the mountaintop moments, when you are fully aware of God's presence; and journey, without fear, off of the mountains and into life's valleys, for that is where God calls you to be a radiant, Christ-reflecting hero. Amen.