

Transfiguration
August 6, 2017
The Rev. Canon Kristi Philip

A couple of weeks ago I spent some time in Glacier National Park with some friends from New York. On our first full day in the park, the five of us climbed into my Subaru and drove the Going to the Sun Road. If you haven't experienced this drive, let me say it is breathtaking – and maybe even a little scary. You begin on the west side of the park in the valley and start to climb up the narrow, winding road that was carved out of the sides of cliffs in a dangerous project completed in 1933 after 11 years of construction.

It has been called a civil engineering miracle. As you drive you skirt rock faces, rub shoulders with waterfalls, try to keep your eyes on the road while unbelievable vistas are unveiled. We stopped near the top to get a better look and saw mountains above us and in the distance and the tiny hairpin curves of the road we had just traveled below. Clouds settled on some of the peaks but the mountains were mighty. Something within all of us shifted just a bit.

For a while, nothing else seemed to matter more than the glory of what surrounded us. The majesty of God's creation. If I had chosen a scripture reading for our journey, it well might have been what we just heard from Luke's gospel – the familiar story of the Transfiguration.

It, too, is about God's glory and it starts out as a day hike up a mountainside with Jesus and three of his disciples, Peter, James and John, who probably got more than they had bargained for. When they reached the top, Jesus' appearance changed. His clothes glistened with dazzling whiteness. It was an amazing sight.

Then they see Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus – spiritual ancestors who represent the law and the prophets. Deep roots of their faith story. And then they hear the voice of God coming out of a cloud: “This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him.”

What do you suppose was going on inside Peter, James and John as they took all of this in? We get a couple of clues. Luke tells us they are terrified. And who wouldn't be? They'd walked up a hill and run smack into the presence of God in a way they weren't expecting at all. They probably had chills up and down their spines and funny feelings in the pits of their stomachs. No doubt something inside them had shifted a bit. And they had no time to process this or ask questions.

Of course we know where this story leads because we hear it every year. The story, after this magnificent moment, leads back down the mountain and toward the cross and on to Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, where, as the creed reminds us, he is seated at the right hand of the Father. He is glorified.

But there is something else. Peter's suggests that they build some dwellings—some little huts – one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Perhaps to honor them or protect them from the elements.

But there is another possibility. Perhaps those little huts were to preserve or even enshrine that numinous experience on the mountain. To give it lasting power. It isn't every day you are in the presence of Moses, Elijah and Jesus on a mountaintop – and also hearing the voice of God.

Who wouldn't want to hold on to such glory – even if it is scaring they daylight out of them?

It is so easy-- so tempting – to want to hang on to something wonderful and wonder-filled. Even when we know we have to move on. It's so easy, so tempting to want to try to re-create wonder, even when it isn't ours to re-create. I suspect that sometimes we want to build something like little huts to enshrine experiences that have meant something important -- or even profound to us.

When I'm on a mountaintop, or at the ocean, or in the presence of a stunning sunset, I automatically reach for my camera. I want to make those amazing colors, those heart-stopping vistas, those amazing memories last a bit longer. I don't want the experience to end. It's probably human nature to do things like this.

And we do it in all kinds of ways. It's easy to lose the distinction between a meaningful and helpful part of our history – a history that has no doubt changed us – and the urge to re-create it. There is a fine line between history and nostalgia. Churches are not exempt from this.

I served at a church for a few years in another part of the diocese that, like many churches, had had a time of great success and energy in the 1950s and 1960s – before I moved there. They'd had a lot of people in church, lots of children, money in the bank -- the kinds of things we often use to label a church as 'healthy' or successful. They felt pride in that success. I guess you could say those were their glory years. Their present reality was a bit less glorious.

References to those early years came up a lot – especially at vestry meetings. Sometimes they tried to reproduce what they had experienced. They'd haul out an old Sunday School curriculum that they had used years ago, even though it was pretty irrelevant to the kids who were using it 20 years later. They'd re-arrange the furniture in the worship space to look

like the old days. And of course none of that ever worked, because the life of faith is about the journey, not just the mountaintop. It's about moving on with Jesus into new places, new challenges. It is about an adventure of risking and stretching and exploring.

The mountaintop, the experience of glory, is about insight. About something shifting inside of us. About God being revealed in a new way. It's about being changed. It's what we take along with us to make us stronger, more fit for the journey ahead. Because our journey includes going back down the mountain and into what lies in the future – going with hope and confidence.

As the Cathedral community, we're launched into a significant part of our journey right now during this transitional time between deans. It might not be a mountaintop experience but it certainly is a time when we are called to pay attention to the presence of God in our midst. To look for and savor those holy moments of presence and insight. To pay attention to where the journey is leading and how we are both being challenged and equipped for what lies ahead.

Part of our journey is also paying extra attention to three things: (1) Where we have been – our history -- both its challenges and its blessings. (2) Where we are now – what we name as our priorities for the present and (3) Where we want to go. What do we want the journey to look like as we continue on? How do we name those new priorities and challenges as we discern together? Certainly we've already begun those conversations and they will continue.

We take some of the glory of God – experienced in many parts of our journey – with us as we move ahead in the coming months. That is strength for the journey. We take some of that insight -- that ‘aha’ about choosing to follow Jesus, the son of God, wherever that takes us.

We continue on this journey like those disciples who hiked up a mountain with Jesus, knowing that Jesus, the son of God, walks along with us. The light who shines in the darkness. The one who invites us to join him in healing and transforming the world.