

"DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP"
February 10, 1991

TEXT: Mark 9:5 "And Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah."

Have you ever been doing something so pleasant, so meaningful, that you wished it would never come to an end? Something so beautiful, so fulfilling that you wanted it to go on forever? Well, that is apparently what happened to Peter and the sons of Zebedee in this morning's scripture lesson.

What we call the "Transfiguration" took place while Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem for the final time. One day, as they were traveling along, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, his closest friends among the disciples, and went up onto a high mountain. Just exactly what happened up there, it is hard to say. The description is far too sketchy. But one thing is certain. Something happened, a "mountaintop" experience in every sense of the word.

Mark seems to think it was something that happened to Jesus, for he writes that even his garments became "glistening, intensely white, as no fuller on earth could bleach them." But I would not be surprised if the real change took place, not in Jesus, but in the disciples. At any rate, whatever happened, it changed their whole outlook on life.

They not only saw Jesus in a different light, but they also became aware of things they had never sensed before. They saw Moses and Elijah, who, for them, personified the Law and the prophets. They experienced God's presence like a cloud all around them, and they heard God's voice saying, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Then, according to Matthew, "they fell on their faces, filled with awe."

Now, all that sounds pretty strange to most of us today, perhaps because we have so little experience with visions and things like that. But there can be little doubt that it all seemed very real to them. Not only real, but beautiful. So beautiful that they wanted to make it last forever. So Peter said, "Lord, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He wanted to enshrine that precious moment, to preserve it and make it last as long as possible.

But that was not meant to be. It is the nature of such experiences that they are fleeting and ephemeral. That is why

Jesus said to Nicodemus that the Holy Spirit is like the wind. It blows when and where it will. We know neither whence it comes nor where it goes. And we can neither hasten its coming nor delay its departure.

We need those experiences in life. They give us courage, and strength, and a sense of the eternal. But they, themselves, are not eternal. Nor, in the end, are they what really matters. They prepare us for life, but in order to live; we have to come down from the mountaintop.

That is how it was that day with Jesus. He and his disciples experienced something very precious, very wonderful. But they could not make it last forever even if they wanted to --because there was work to be done down below.

There was a little boy, an epileptic whose fits threw him into dangerous things like fire and water. A boy whose life was being twisted and ravaged, not only by his illness, but by the ignorance and fear of those who knew him. "Don't play with him," other parents warned. "He has a demon." And when he grew up, if he grew up, who would hire him, or marry him, or be his friend? He was doomed to a life of poverty and loneliness --unless Jesus came down from the mountaintop to heal him.

It was much the same with Moses. We all know about his vision of God upon Mount Sinai while he tended his father-in-law's sheep. He saw a bush that burned but was not consumed. He heard the voice of God, Himself. And he hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. It was an awesome moment --for Moses and for the world. But the real meaning in that moment was not what happened up there on that sacred mountain, but what happened afterward when Moses came down from the mountaintop to lead his people out of Egypt.

Something of the same sort happened to Isaiah. Only his "mountaintop" experience took place in the temple and not on a mountain at all. You will find the story in the sixth chapter of Isaiah, one of the most majestic passages in the whole Bible. Isaiah saw the Lord "high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple." And he saw angelic creatures who cried one to another, saying "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6:3)

But that experience did not last forever either. It was only a prelude to the even greater things which followed. After his sin had been forgiven, Isaiah heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah answered, "Here am I! Send me."

And it can still be that way today. Some of you probably know the name of J. B. Phillips, the great English theologian and Biblical scholar. Literally millions of people have been blessed by his sparkling and thought-provoking translation of the New

Testament and by his many books and articles. But what you may not know is that he very nearly did not live to write them.

One night, after a long and dangerous operation, Phillips, only partly conscious, overheard the doctor whisper to the nurse, "Poor chap! I'm afraid he won't live till morning." And in his sleep, if that is what it was, he found himself alone, depressed, and miserable, trudging wearily down a dusty slope. All around him were the wrecks and refuse of human living: ruined houses, pools of stagnant water, and rubbish of every kind.

Suddenly, on the other side of a little valley, he saw a vision of incredible beauty, and he noticed that only a tiny stream separated him from all that loveliness. He ran toward the shining white bridge which spanned the stream and was about to cross it when a figure all in white appeared before him. This figure, whom Dr. Phillips described as "supremely gentle yet absolutely authoritative," smiled at him, then shook his head, and pointed him back to the miserable slope from which he had just come.

Dr. Phillips writes: "I've never known such bitter disappointment, and although I turned obediently, I could not help bursting into tears. This passionate weeping must have wakened me, for the next thing I remember was the figure of the night-nurse bending over me and saying, rather reproachfully: 'What are you crying for? You've come through tonight --now you're going to live!'" Like so many others, he wanted to stay on the "mountaintop" forever, but there was work to be done.

Somewhere I heard the story of two little boys who had turned their tree-house into a make-believe space station. Their lively imaginations had them fighting "Star Wars" all over again when suddenly their mother stood beneath the tree and called them home for dinner. One of them turned to the other and said rather sheepishly, "Oh, oh! I think I hear earth calling."

And so it is with us. We, too, have our "mountaintops." Not real mountains like Sinai perhaps, but "mounts of transfiguration" just the same. We come here to this place of sacred memories where we are lifted by music, scripture, and prayer into our own brief moments of peace and power. But, lovely as that moment is, its true value is not in itself, but in that which it empowers us to do later.

In our relationships, too, there are times when everything is going just right and we feel oh so good about ourselves and about each other. It would be nice if those times lasted forever, but all too soon we have to come down from the mountaintop to engage in the hard work of relating effectively. And, in business, there are times when we have made the big sale, solved the terrible problem, or received a big promotion. How wonderful it would be if we could hold that wonderfully confident feeling forever. But there's always the next customer, the next problem, the next job to do.

Out there, in the world from which we came, the world to which we will soon return, there are people who need us, who need our strength, who need our love. I do not know what their names are, or what they look like, but they are there just the same. And, if you listen very carefully perhaps, like Isaiah, you, too, will hear a soft voice saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" God give us the Grace to answer as Isaiah did, "Here am I. Send me!"

For that is the real power of worship, not the glory of our moment on the mountain, but in the call of earth to come down and serve God's people.