Text: Luke 9:28-36

**Introduction**

Are there things in your life that you know people expect to be big things, but to you they just aren’t. Or you are much more ambivalent about them than might be polite to let on?

The transfiguration story to me is a little like that. And I think I have a bit of a reason. This is the text that always gets used as the example of “the mountaintop experience.” And I don’t think we even begin to understand was “mountaintop experience” means. The American church since the middle of the 18tth century during the 2nd great awakening spurred by innovations of Charles Finney has been chasing them. Finney was a revivalist – outdoor tent meeting. He was also an amateur psychologist convinced that he could apply the new scientific methods to expanding the Kingdom of God. So at his revivals he’d have something called the anxious bench. Anybody who came who wasn’t baptized or who was having doubts would be placed on the anxious bench which would be right here in front. Those who were already “on fire” would be all around. And the preaching would be largely aimed at that bench. Leading up to the grand altar call. Have you made you decision? Have you been to the mountaintop?

Finney’s methods numerically were rather successful. At least for a while. They produced an experience. But the American church has been striving to reproduce that experience over and over again. A bit like the line from the Journey song “livin’ just to find emotion, hiding somewhere in the night.” Don’t stop believing. Everything most Christian groups do is about “wanting that thrill…just one more time.” But there are two huge problems. The mountaintop experience is the experience of the presence of God. And God is present where and when and how he wills. We can’t manufacture the presence of God. We confuse high emotion for God’s presence. And when the emotion fades, we wonder if God has left us. The second big problem is that the experience of God is that, it is an experience. Attempting to speak in the basis of an experience that is beyond words is a fools task. That most we can do is witness.

**Text**

Now I want to support those assertions a bit from our gospel today. Jesus has taken Peter, James and John with him up the mountain. He’s gone up the mountain to pray. And if I’m reading it right, the fact is that Peter, James and John could have completely missed this. Luke tells us, “Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep.” Jesus becomes dazzling white. He’s talking with Moses and Elijah. (More about what he’s talking about later.) And these three are sleeping through it. It is only as the men were parting from him that they become fully awake and see the glory. And Peter blurts out, “It’s good that we are here!”

Now I want to give Peter more credit here than we might. When he’s continues on speaking he wants to build three tents or booths. And there are two valid things in the history of Israel that I think Peter is immediately reflecting on. Moses met God regularly in the tent of meeting. Peter can easily be thinking this experience is so great, I’m so happy that I’ve been invited to meet God on a regular basis. Let’s get the new tents up. The second thing is the Hebrew holiday of Sukkot, the festival of booths. It was the end times harvest festival. And all Israel would live in booths or tents like they did for the 40 years in the wilderness. It was the festival of longing for the final promised land. And seeing the glory, that final promised land must be coming now. God has come to rescue his people. We will leave these tents and go from glory to glory as we cross into the promised land. Either way, Peter is expecting this glory to be the increasing and never ending experience. But Luke tells us “he didn’t know what he said.”

We want the thrill, but we don’t know what it means. We want to keep it. But this is not how God has promised to meet us. It might be good that we are here. But life is not lived in the mountaintop. And chasing it, is chasing the wrong thing.

Instead, what comes down in the cloud – the presence of the Father. The cloud overshadowed them and they were afraid. And we all should be in such a moment. And the voice says one thing, “This is my son, the chosen one, listen to him.” And then it all is gone. “Jesus was found alone.” The experience isn’t a bad thing. But the important thing is hearing. Listen to him. Instead of chasing the experience, listen to Jesus so that you might understand what has happen. The experience of God is not the key to knowing him. As Jesus would say later, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet believed.” The key to knowing God is hearing the voice of the Shepherd. The Key to knowing God is listening to how he has revealed himself.

**Christology**

When Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah, they are talking about something specific. “They spoke of his departure.” One of the cases that I wish our translators has just transliterated the word. It is Exodus. They spoke of His exodus. Peter is thinking about the Sukkot, the harvest. But Jesus is speaking about an Exodus, a passover. Jesus is preparing to bring his people out of the Egypt of Sin. Jesus is preparing to be the blood of the lamb on the door. Jesus is preparing to lead the people of God through this life by his blood into the Promised Land – the New Jerusalem. With Signs and Wonders his Exodus is our Exodus. He is our Passover lamb.

And this is so important. We can be dazzled by the light and the experience. We all want the glory. And when it receeds, and Jesus is found alone. And where he is most alone it right there on the cross. Even Jesus wondered, “why have you forsaken me?” Stripped of the glory. Dishonored by all. Can God really be here, or has he left us? But this is My Son, the Chosen One. On the mountain top, and in the pit. All the way down. Such that there is not a sin that he has not taken. There is not a soul in sheol who cannot be part of His Exodus.

**Moral**

We think it would be a lot easier if it could be done by sight. But sight doesn’t tell us what we are experiencing. Satan can just as easily appear as an angel of light. How often have we thought something was from God, only later to realize we jumped to fast after it?

Seeing isn’t believing. Believing is seeing. Listening to the Word forms our sight such that we can understand the vision. Seeing the cross alone isn’t enough. If all we did was see it, it’s looks like the worst loss ever. We have to believe the testimony about it. Here is our Passover lamb. Here is our Exodus.

“And they kept silent and told no one in those days anything of what they had seen.” They would all eventually talk. After they resurrection. After the Exodus. After Jesus would send them back out to make disciples of all nations baptizing and teaching. When they listened, witnessing was necessary. Peter writes, “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty... we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Pet. 1:16,18 ESV).”

The words come in good time. After the listening.

**Eschatological**

We long for the mountaintop. We want the eternal presence of God. Today, we live on the plane. Today the presence of God is largely where he promised. Under bread and wine, in the Water, in the gathering, in the Word proclaimed, in the least of these. Today the presence of God is given to us in Word and Sacrament and Charity. Because today we are on our Exodus. Today we are living in the tent of this body.

Tomorrow, in the resurrection body, in the New Jerusalem, we will see God face to face.

The longing isn’t wrong. “It is good to be here.” But today we listen. Tomorrow we see.