

September 30, 2007  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

“Mountaintop Experiences”

Text: Luke 16:19-31 (Read during the preaching)

The “mountaintop experience,” isn’t that what we all really want? We want the epiphany: the sudden overwhelming and emotional revelation that changes our life forever. An experience that makes God so clear to us that our faith becomes complete and we never doubt Him again.

Some of us, maybe even all of us, have had a mountaintop experience to some degree or other. We’ve had some crisis in our life, the outcome of which looked dire and impossible to escape. Then somehow things worked out. Things were OK or even better than OK. Our prayers were answered and we could clearly see the hand of God at work in our lives. We could feel His presence surrounding us and were thankful and loved Him as completely as possible.

It doesn’t have to be a crisis either. I imagine this mountaintop experience may often be the case with mothers and fathers at the birth of a child. We see a miracle and are in awe of our creator. I had one of these experiences when I was on an East African photo safari. I was at the a lodge on a bluff looking out over the Serengeti Plain stretched out in a lawn chair sipping a beer and enjoying the view as dusk approached. I was awestruck by the beauty. My gaze came to rest on a dark section of land in the distance which struck me as peculiar. As I watched I realized that the land was in motion. I was puzzled for a moment and then the realization hit me. It wasn’t a land mass, it was an incredibly huge herd of wildebeest migrating across the plain. I remember having an incredibly quiet moment where a single thought filled my mind: “God is.”

It was a great moment. I still can feel an emotional rush when I recall it. Such epiphany moments are wonderful. But they fade. They may serve to strengthen our faith, but they can’t sustain it. God reveals Himself to us again and again and again in creation. We see His hand all around us. But it is a creation polluted by sin and we also see plenty to draw us away from God. The revelation that “God is”

is indeed awesome, but it is ambiguous, and you can be sure that our sinful nature will prompt us to take that ambiguous revelation wherever it suits our selfish wants and desires.

In the end, I think this is what Jesus' parable in our Gospel lesson is about.

*“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'”*

There's a lot here to digest, and we can go in a couple wrong directions. First, this is not a snapshot of heaven and hell on which to base our understanding. It's a parable; a fictional story told by Christ to drive home a point. We can accept the truths backed up by Scripture elsewhere that there is a judgment and there is no chance to cross between heaven and hell afterward. But the looking and shouting across the chasm between heaven and hell and conversing with Abraham in the midst of torment are part of the allegory of the story.

Second, this is not a parable about the evils of wealth or the holiness of poverty. It kind of seems that way, and the tale certainly calls on us to remember the parable of the rich fool who trusted in his wealth and paid for it in the end. The truth of that story is almost assumed here. The rich man in torment seems to accept his fate, acknowledging that as he enjoyed wealth and prosperity on earth he was faithless to God—not even providing his table scraps to the man Lazarus stranded outside his gate. And

Lazarus, whose name mean “God helps” isn’t a major character. He’s just kind of poor, miserable and there and then assumed to be faithful because he ends up in heaven. No, the real thrust of this parable comes in the interchange at the end of the story as the rich man makes a request.

*“Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’”*

The parable in the end comes down to a question of faith. The rich man after his death realizes he never had it, and all too late begins thinking about someone other than himself. He makes a request for his brothers. He asks that they have a “mountaintop experience.” He figures that a dead man coming back from the grave to confront his brothers will be enough of a shock, enough of a miracle, enough of an emotional jolt that they will be knocked into belief and trust in God. He hopes that one experience will allow them to once and for all defeat their love of the world with its material wealth. Maybe he is even depending on their logic to make them say, “Hey. Dead guy came back! I’d better stop focusing on this life and start thinking of the next one!”

But the simple fact is that it wouldn’t work that way. *“He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”* Look at the wonders and mysteries and terrors and miracles people experience in their lives yet aren’t driven to faith. Saving faith isn’t something we attain for ourselves through logic or intense emotional experience. It’s not something that gets knocked into us by a sudden shock. Remember in the book of John, a man named Lazarus is in fact raised from being dead so long that he already stinks, yet unbelievers remained unbelievers, even to the point of planning to re-kill Lazarus because he upsets their worldly plans.

In the parable Father Abraham points to Moses and the Prophets, to Scripture, as the place where people find saving faith. And where does that Word point? It points to Jesus Christ, always to Jesus Christ. The Old Testament, Moses and the Prophets, was always pointing forward to Christ. And I think

this is the main point of the parable; if you look to experiences and things of yourself and of this fallen earth as the basis of your faith, that faith will always fail. Saving faith is always in the promises of God. It is a trusting in God's work, God's love, God's plan to save His wayward and erring creation.

And ironically, that promise is the person telling this parable and He is going to return from the dead to complete the promise. Christ, God's Son sent down to earth, is where we have to look for salvation. We have even more than Moses and the Prophets. We have the full account of God's promise fulfilled. We don't look to our own "mountaintop" experiences as the foundation for faith. We look to the hilltop experience of Christ, His suffering and death our behalf on the hill of Golgotha. We look to Christ, the Word made flesh, as the reason for hope. It is Christ's Holy Spirit gifted to us that allows us to trust in this bizarre work of God.

It is Christ and Christ alone who allows us to receive forgiveness. It is Christ's Spirit we receive in Holy Baptism. It is Christ's body and blood we receive in Holy Communion. It is by Christ's command that we receive absolution from our sins when we repent. God's Word points us to Christ and the forgiveness He purchased for us whenever we hear it. Saving faith is not a work of our mind or emotion. It is a work of God's Holy Spirit again and again pointing us towards Christ's sacrifice on our behalf.

I witnessed my first altar call event a few weeks back, and it seemed like an awful lot of folks who were already Christians took the trip up to the stage. I've got nothing against rededicating yourself to Christ. I try to do it several times a day...especially after getting cut off in traffic. But it made me wonder if these folks felt they had to get themselves emotionally worked up in order to feel their faith was genuine; that this altar call, or maybe the next one or the one after that, would be the one that would enable them to be sustained in "true" faith. I feared the thinking was, "If I can get excited enough, if I can maintain an emotional high about God, then it will sustain me through life."

Faith is not about how intense we feel about Christ or how much we do for Christ. Faith is about trusting in what He's done for us.

Can I get an “Amen?” Of course I can’t, we’re Lutherans! But does that fact that in worship we don’t dance and shout mean a lack of faith? Certainly not. Jesus Christ died and rose for the forgiveness of our sins! Do we believe that and trust in that fact for our salvation? Yes. That’s faith. Martin Luther could come back from the grave and dance a jig across the chancel, but if it doesn’t point to Christ it’s not going to do our faith a lick of good.

Finding Christ is the way of finding faith. Returning to Christ in Word, prayer, praise and sacrament is the way of strengthening and sustaining faith. If trusting in God’s grace through Christ makes you emotional and want to dance around, be emotional. Dance around. If you trust in God’s grace through Christ yet are slightly more animated than a wooden plank, well that’s fine too. I think I can even say that if you want to go up to an altar call as a celebration and rededication of the faith you already have, that’s fine too.

But always be seeking Christ and not some special experience in and of yourself, for Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise. Seek him in God’s Word. Seek Him in Prayer. Receive Him in the bread and wine. Find His forgiveness in repentance and absolution. Rejoice that your faith is not based in our flawed bodies and minds, but in the perfect God made man—the loving promise of God our father completely come to fulfillment in Jesus.