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I felt as though I went atop a mountain this week as I attended a pastor's and leader's conference at AMBS, the Mennonite seminary in Elkhart. The four-part congregational hymn singing was wonderful as we worshiped while also singing music from various cultures and styles. The staff was welcoming as they offered hospitality to those who traveled a great distance and to those of us who lived nearby. The snacks were tasty and the meals delicious. The speakers were challenging as they invited us to think about the issues of racism in our country and our churches. I felt as though I had climbed a mountain for reflection and renewal.

It's a bit like going to church camp for a week or a weekend spiritual retreat. How many of you have ever had a chance to get away from the routines of life, going to a setting that invites you to draw closer to God, where you might experience a transformation as you encounter challenging ideas?

Peter, James, and John had an opportunity to do such a thing as they climbed a mountain with Jesus, but before doing so Jesus challenged his followers

to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow him. He suggested that those who try to save their lives would lose them, and those who lose their lives would find them, or as one translation explains:

Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self.¹

Jesus also told his followers that when they get to the big city of Jerusalem, religious leaders would torture him, and he would eventually die. We don't hear the thoughts of his followers after Jesus told them what might happen to him and to them, but I imagine they struggled to sort out these difficult words, wondering about the risks involved and whether they were up to the challenge.

Wouldn't you stop and think about following someone if you were told it would be difficult? If someone you admire told you that danger and death were lurking around the corner, wouldn't you

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take a moment to decide whether you could follow along and become entangled in the pains that could impact your life?

For a week his disciples pondered these ideas, and then Jesus invited three of his followers, Peter, James, and John, on a hike up a mountain. And there, something happened. Amazing. Mysterious. Remarkable. Hard to explain. Matthew describes Jesus' appearance with common themes used to describe other mystical encounters elsewhere in the Bible: face shining like the sun, dazzling white clothing. And to top it off, figures from the past arrived, Elijah and Moses—two of the most well-known leaders within their history. I can just imagine the conversation between the three disciples:

“Who are those people talking with Jesus?”

“That one over there reminds me of Moses. And that one could be the prophet Elijah.”

“Something strange is happening here. I wish I had a way to capture this moment, a way to

remember it, a way to let others know what we've experienced.”

Peter suggested, “I have a great idea. Let's build a tent for each of them, a place to offer shelter, and something that can remain here to visit after this event ends.”

Tents were seen as dwelling places for divine beings, reminding them of their history from thousands of years before when their ancestors had wandered the desert, living as nomads in tents. They carried with them a special tent, containing the Ark of the Tabernacle, where they would gather to celebrate God's presence. And since the tent was portable, they could carry it with them whenever they moved to a new land, reminding them that God went with them.

Maybe Peter wanted to capture the moment there on the mountain by building tents. It was a photo-op, but since they didn't have cameras back then, building a tent was the next best thing. They could bring their friends back there years later, point to the tent, and exclaim, “I built that one for

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Jesus. And over there, Moses stayed in that tent. And that one housed Elijah.” Just imagine the “oohs” and “ahhs” as Peter showed them around, serving as their tour guide at his newly created theme park called, “Mountaintop Adventures with Jesus.”

But as soon as Peter suggested this idea of building tents, the sky became overcast as a cloud covered the mountain. They heard what sounded like a voice, reminding them of Jesus’ connection to God, like a child to a parent, well-loved and respected, someone they should pay attention to. The three disciples fell to the ground in fear, with Jesus reminding them to not be afraid. And when Peter, James, and John looked up, the visiting figures had disappeared into the mist. As Jesus and his three friends began walking down the mountain, Jesus told them to not tell anyone what had happened, nixing their plan for a Mountain Top Theme Park.

And then they’re right back to the stuff of life: encountering people in need of healing, hearing that Jesus will die, dealing with people frustrated

with paying taxes, dealing with conflicts and sin. So much for a mountaintop faith. It’s back to reality.

Have you ever felt that way, wondering why your faith doesn’t lift you from the struggles of life, wishing you could remain in the moment of a wonderful experience rather than returning to the routines of life?

This week I read an author who reflected on this issue:

Christianity isn’t about mountaintops, it’s about valleys. If it was about mountaintops then Jesus wouldn’t have been born in a cave to peasant parents from a backwater town.

If our faith was about mountaintops Jesus wouldn’t have been executed like a common criminal, hung on a tree, mocked and scourged.

If our faith was all about mountaintops Jesus’ followers wouldn’t have been a rag-tag band of disciples who fell asleep at a drop of a hat, doubted at the slightest turn of fortune or denied their teacher in times of greatest need. No, this faith of ours is definitely the faith of the valley. This faith of ours gets lived out in our day-to-day lives because Christianity is less about fancy and more about simple.

But simple doesn't mean less holy. You see, what we forget is that even down here in the valley, sacred things happen all the time. The Holy can — the Holy does — pop up everywhere.

The sacred isn't necessarily glamorous and the Holy needn't be in some transfigured glory. Usually, God is just right here, walking with us on our journey through the valley of regular life.

But, who can blame Peter, or the rest of us, for wanting to freeze the moment of glory atop the mountain?²

Sometimes we may wish the mountaintop experiences in our lives could last longer, that the changes we strive to make in our lives would last longer. But sometimes we experience transformations, and yet somehow things seem the same, as in the case when

A saloon keeper sold his old tavern to a local church. Enthusiastic church members tore out the bar, added some lights, gave the whole place a fresh coat of paint, and installed some pews.

Somehow a parrot that belonged to the saloon keeper was left behind. On Sunday morning that colorful bird was watching from

the rafters. When the minister appeared, he squawked, "New proprietor!" When those who were to lead in worship marched in, the bird piped, "New floor show!" But when the bird looked out over the congregation, he screeched, "Same old crowd!"³

Even after an experience where we may experience mountaintop faith, when we come down the mountain, we may feel like the same old crowd, and yet, Jesus continues to move within us, offering us faith on the mountain, in the valleys, and in our ordinary days as we go about life.

¹ Matthew 16:24-26, *The Message Bible*

² Catherine Dempsey, from "See the Transfiguration, Feel the Transformation," a sermon preached on February 19, 2012 at Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Buffalo, New York. goodshepbuff.blogspot.com.

³ Hodgin, Michael. 1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers (Kindle Locations 2707-2712). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #454.