

February 23, 2020 – Matthew 17:1-9

The chancel was set. The band had practiced. The readers were ready. It was Praise and Worship Night at NCF.

NCF, or Northern Christian Fellowship, was an organization on the campus of Ohio Northern University, where I went to college. For all intents and purposes they functioned like Campus Crusade for Christ. A para-church group where students met weekly to sing contemporary Christian music led by a small band and hear a message from a speaker.

For my first two or three years of college, I was heavily involved in NCF. I attended regularly. I was friends with many in the group. And I was a member of their praise and worship band.

And so I was excited about this particular service. It was Praise and Worship Night. The Sunday evening before finals week, we would all get together for an amazing evening of music and scripture reading. No sermon, per se. Just a time of worship and renewal before a tough week of testing.

And this one in particular looked to be special. The music we had prepared was phenomenal. The crowd that gathered was huge. But best of all was the mood that had been set. For you see, the student in charge of this service had surrounded the chancel of the Campus Chapel with candles. Dozens and dozens of tea lights on the floor. The only illumination in the room, but enough to light up everyone in a warm glow.

And soon I was singing my heart out and the students were singing their hearts out and everyone was filled with the peace of God until... we smelled smoke. And looked down and saw that the carpet was fire. That the tea lights he had purchased were intended to be put in holders. And they were spilling molten wax everywhere. And some of it was igniting.

And so there was a mad dash to snuff out the flames and extinguish the candles and open the doors and windows and turn up the sanctuary lights. And yes, we continued with the service, but the mood was gone. Between the panic and smoke and change in lighting and, frankly, the scattered prayers that we would not be expelled for vandalizing the chapel. It just wasn't the same.

What we were aiming for in that service was what many people refer to as a "mountaintop experience." Mountaintop experiences are those times in your life when you feel immensely close to God. A sense of peace or joy or love or commitment or one of many other positive emotions.

And they're not just confined to contemporary worship or college campuses or even church at all. You can have a mountaintop experience in a very traditional worship service or an old country church or on a mission trip. Or even out camping or playing with your grandkids or staring at a sunset. The circumstances don't matter. What matters is the connection you feel with God.

And there's nothing wrong with mountaintop experiences. Except for the fact that they're temporary. Whether it's because of the carpet catching fire or simply because of life and hardship and tragedy setting in. Mountaintop experiences just can't be the norm.

And that's something that scripture teaches us. The very name "mountaintop experience" makes reference to the fact that many of the most prominent, Godly men of the Bible had powerful experiences with God on mountaintops. Noah and the rainbow. Abraham sacrificing Isaac. Elijah and the still small voice.

And, of course, Moses in our Old Testament lesson for today. Here we have Moses preparing to go up onto Mount Sinai in an experience that will utterly change both him and the Israelites. That will define their worship for the next 1,500 years. That will literally shake the earth with fire and smoke. And that will leave Moses so transformed that his face literally glows with the presence of God.

And yet, when Moses comes down from that mountain, what happens? He finds the people dancing in front of a golden calf. Worshipping it as their god. The mountaintop was perfect and awe inspiring, but Moses forgets all of it in an instant when he sees once again the reality of sin and breaks the tablets of the Ten Commandments in his frustration and anger.

A similar moment occurs to the disciples on the mountaintop with Jesus that we read about today. They go up with him thinking that he will probably teach them something wise or lead them in prayer, but instead they experience something that will stick with them for the rest of their lives. The sight of Jesus transfigured before them. Changed and glorified until his face shines like the sun and his clothes become as white as pure light.

And then, to top it off, Moses and Elijah standing right there in front of them. Talking with Jesus like it's the most normal thing in the world. And the voice of God coming out of the cloud, booming in their ears. Reminding them of Jesus' divinity and purpose.

It terrifies the disciples. And yet, Peter tells us in our Epistle that it was a moment of majesty. They witnessed the honor and glory of the Son of God. They heard the Father's voice. It was absolutely amazing. It was everything that they had always wanted Jesus to show them. This was exactly what they signed up for.

But then, it's over. And they're back to fighting with the Pharisee's. And struggling with the Romans. And watching as their Lord is arrested. And accused of crimes he didn't commit. And stripped. And beaten. And nailed to a cross. And dying before them.

And all of a sudden, that mountaintop experience is a long way off. Because they've experienced a new mountaintop. The mountain of Calvary. And they've experienced not peace or joy or love or commitment. But anger. And sorrow. And pain. And death.

As Moses walked down that mountain and saw once again the reality of sin, so also did the disciples. They experienced the very sin that sent their Lord to the cross in payment of it. And it probably left them wondering, "Why did he do it?" Why show them anything? Why do all the miracles? Why help all those people? Why stand in front of them shining like the sun? Why show them all this power and majesty if he's just going to die a criminal's death?

Until that morning two days later, when they remembered Jesus' words. "*Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.*" Don't cling to this moment. Don't convince others that this is what being a disciple means. Don't go around telling people that following Jesus means following a man who lives his life surrounded by glory and honor. Don't tell the world that being a Christian is one giant mountaintop experience.

Because it's not. It wasn't then. It isn't now. But that doesn't mean those experiences don't have value. That moment when Jesus was transfigured before them gave the disciples something precious and valuable.

A glimpse into the wonder of Jesus' resurrection. A glimpse into the joy of seeing him rise from the dead. A glimpse into the majesty of seeing him return on the clouds of glory. A glimpse into that moment when he comes to all those he loves and says, "*Rise and have no fear.*"

Mountaintop experiences are good, so long as we remember that they are not what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Being a disciple means anger and sorrow and pain and death. It means struggling with the reality of a sinful world. It means struggling with the reality of our own sinfulness.

But in the midst of that struggle we do get the gift of moments with God. Mountaintops where we get a look into the future where everything is right. And everything is good. And everything is the way that God intended it to be.

Because that moment is coming. As the resurrection came to Jesus on the third day, so it will come to us on the last day. He was the firstborn of many brothers. The first fruits of the resurrection.

And as his transfiguration was meant to give hope to the disciples before his death, so also his resurrection gives hope to us before our deaths. He is our mountaintop who gives us the promise of his Word. And we need not ever be afraid. Amen.