

READ THE TEXT

On a wall in the Vatican art gallery
hangs a painting by the great Italian artist Raphael.

He has portrayed this very scene from Luke 9. A picture with two scenes.

Above the mountain floats the transfigured Christ in His glory.

On either side stand Moses and Elijah,
while at their feet huddle the three fearful disciples.

Down in the valley below

we see the contorted figure of an epileptic boy.

There are people around him too – anguished and pointing their fingers
toward the brightness far above.

Two strangely contrasted scenes... yet together in the same picture.

Two different places we must visit again and again if we are to be followers of Jesus –
the mountaintop, with the glorious CHRIST
and the valley below, with the anguished NEIGHBOR.

Look first at the scene on top of the mountain.

What a sight it must have been!

Just imagine seeing Jesus in the glory He had enjoyed in heaven.

Face radiant, beaming...

clothes brilliant white like a bolt of lightning.

Imagine hearing the voice of God, rolling like thunder:

“This is my beloved SON!”

It was, in more ways than one, a MOUNTAINTOP EXPERIENCE!

We have such moments, don't we?

Maybe it was your glorious wedding day

or sitting at a live performance of Handel's MESSIAH at a concert hall

or Christmas Eve, when the darkened church was illumined with

hundreds of candles and all sang “Silent Night”

Maybe this morning here in church will be such a time for you...
a mountaintop experience.

How close God seems at such moments.

Almost we can hear His voice assuring us.
Almost we can feel His mighty hand on our shoulder.

I remember one man who confided to me as he exited a Sunday service:
"I love coming here. It's the one time all week I can
escape the RUSH and the BURDENS of everyday."

Escape!... Rest!... Peace!
No wonder Peter wanted to build a shelter and prolong the experience.

But NO. It was not to be.

Peter's plans were interrupted.
The vision faded, and all too soon, there came the familiar voice of His Master,
"GET UP. LET'S GO."

Peter could not go on looking at the GLORIOUS FACE on the mountaintop,
for down in the valley below, OTHER FACES were waiting....

the tortured face of the epileptic boy,
scarred with injuries during his seizures

and the anxious face of the boy's father, lined with years of worry
about his son's future.

We see such faces too, don't we, down here in our own Willamette Valley?

The man with the bored, EMPTY face.
He is now retired from the paper mill – and time hangs heavy on his hands.
His shoulders sag in a sad lump. He watches TV too much – and finds
that he and his wife don't have much to talk about any more.

There is a girl with a face HARDENED like plaster. Her home is an unhappy one.
Her father drinks a lot and sometimes doesn't come home. Her mother
communicates most often by yelling at her.
The girl has withdrawn into a shell. Her face has become a mask.
That's how she has learned to cope.

Here is a couple with drawn, ANXIOUS faces.

They sit in the hospital lounge – she biting her nails, he thumbing idly through old magazines.

Their son is in surgery after a motorcycle accident. “Serious head injuries” is all they’ve been told. Will their son live, they wonder. Will he ever be normal again?

These people, and many others, live beside us in this valley the Bible calls “the valley of the shadow of death.”

The MOUNTAINTOP...and the VALLEY BELOW.

Raphael painted both on his canvas,
and Luke placed them side by side in His Gospel story
to tell us that both are crucial to the Christian life.

For GOD meets us in both places!

And He has something urgently important for us to do in each one.

The MOUNTAINTOP

is where we meet His glory and grace, hear His forgiveness, and
commune with our Savior.

The VALLEY

is where we are sent to serve the neighbor’s need,
where we put to work the love God gave us.

We dare not have one without the other!

If we spent all our time in the valley among the hurts and pressures people feel,
if we never stopped to come face to face with God,
if we never caught a glimpse of the glory and grace of Jesus,

WHAT WOULD WE HAVE TO GIVE TO THE NEIGHBOR?

Luke answers that question

by telling us what happened in the valley with the other 9 disciples
who had not made the trip to the mountaintop.

They had encountered the demon-possessed boy and his frantic father...
and they could do nothing!

“I begged them to drive out the demon,”
the father cried to Jesus, **“but they could not!”**

Without the vision on the mountaintop,
our faith is too feeble, our love too limp, our sins too strong
to accomplish anything.

So God invites us to come away for a while, as we do even now, to LOOK
and to LISTEN.

When those three huddled disciples on the mountain listened,
they heard wondrous things – Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus
about His imminent “departure” –
that coming death and resurrection that would bring God’s FORGIVENESS
for all people and set us free from death itself.

When they looked, they saw a glimpse of the glory Jesus had
before He came to earth, the glory He would have again when He returned
to heaven, the glory He promised to give us there.

Years later, the memory of that mountaintop moment
strengthened them when suffering and persecution came.

**“We were with Him, Peter was later to recall, with Him on the holy
mountain...we heard the voice from heaven”**

So it happens for me and for you!

We gather here in church to kneel at Jesus’ feet.
We hear the glorious music and the voice from heaven.
We catch a glimpse of God,
taste the supper at the Communion rail,
sense His nearness and help as we pray.

Ah, but we cannot stay HERE all the time!
Cannot spend our life seeking nothing but mountaintop experiences...

For if we do not go to the VALLEY where the neighbor waits in need,
and if we face no trials and tears,
our faith will be a HOLLOW THING –
an empty ritual, a lifeless creed – a gift never taken from its box and used!

“Faith without works is dead,” wrote James.

It’s easy, isn’t it, to keep religion in church?

To come to services, attend Bible class, travel to youth retreats,
sign up for seminars and exciting speakers...

but if we DO NOTHING with all that, while all around us are
hungry and homeless people
marriages failing and children abused
the lonely, guilty and hopeless

**THEN WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE GLORIES WE SAW
AND THE GRACE WE RECEIVED?**

Martin Luther King devoted his life to DOING SOMETHING for the people
hurting “down in the valley”... He lent his voice and his time to his fellow
black Americans who had long been mistreated.

In 1968 he went to Memphis, Tennessee, to stand up for the
sanitation workers in their struggle for justice.

Why? Said King in a now-famous speech the night before he was assassinated:
“I’ve been to the mountaintop... I just want to do God’s will.”

It happens to all kinds of people – the famous like Martin Luther King and the
unknowns like Warren Mitchell.

Mitchell was a cab driver in New York City
who found himself “on the mountaintop” as he listened to a religious broadcast
on his cab radio one day.

It struck him that he must do something with what he heard – something for people.

But WHAT?

He realized that every day he met dozens of people in his cab.
What could he do for them in such a short time?

Mitchell decided that he would begin to LISTEN – really listen to each one –
for those few minutes.

He prayed that if God would open a door to do anything more, he would obey.

Amazing things began to happen in his cab.

Sullen people brightened up once they realized their cabby was actually paying attention.

Mitchell began to stock a supply of tracts to give people who were discouraged and angry with things.

One day a man told him that he was intent on committing suicide.

Mitchell changed course, drove him to a hospital, and saw to it that someone helped him.

The man was astounded when, a few days later, Mitchell followed up with a visit.

“You’re the first person who’s cared about me in years!” the man exclaimed.

Do you think Warren Mitchell is an exceptional person?

He doesn’t think so!

“I’m just an ordinary man,” he maintains, “but I take Jesus seriously.”

The difference is that Warren Mitchell, like Martin Luther King, had visited the mountaintop, had looked into the face of Jesus, and had come away changed...

the very thing that had happened to Peter, James, and John on the mountain with Jesus that day.

They had seen him in His glory.

They had heard about the coming grace.

They came away changed.

Even their enemies could tell the difference. The Book of Acts tells us,

“When they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were common, uneducated men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”

You have too!

In this very place. At this very moment!

For I am speaking HIS WORD, telling you HIS STORY.

Telling you that He came on a mission to rescue you. Died and rose again.
Ascended to the Father.

Because of that, you are forgiven. Set free. Alive again!

And even now comes knocking at your heart's door, calling you...

To do what?

Ah, to look into the face of your NEIGHBOR. To slow down. To listen.

To listen first. Then SPEAK – to tell people that God loves them in Christ.

To SPEAK LOVE, and then to put it into ACTION, wherever you see a need,
like cab driver Warren Mitchell.

This morning, we are met together on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John.

Very soon, He will say to us, **“Rise, let us be going”**
to those who are waiting in the valley below.