



That City on a Hill



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

February 7, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2016-02-07-AWW.mp3>.*

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Exodus 34:29-35

Luke 9:28-36

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The Last Sunday after Epiphany & Annual Parish Meeting

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Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. (Exodus 34:29)

About eight days after Peter had acknowledged Jesus as the Christ of God, Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. (Luke 9:28-29)

When my wife and I can escape town for a day, we like to explore the Virginia countryside. We love the beautiful, rolling hills, the farms and wineries, and the way the land slowly flows into the Blue Ridge Mountains.

On one such day, we decided to take a hike in the mountains, hoping to find a spot that would offer us great views, and after doing some research online, I thought I found the perfect location. We could drive up into the mountains, park the car along Skyline Drive, and then, only have to walk one mile to a nearby peak. The website did describe the trail as steep, rising some 800 feet over that one mile, but that didn't sound so bad to me: What's 800 feet? How hard could it be?

It turns out 800 feet is a lot. Over the course one mile, it meant we were going pretty much straight uphill. We were not hiking as much as we were mountain climbing, and the entire time, my wife kept glaring at me, and using her non-church vocabulary, to let me know this was not what she had in mind.

But, when we reached the top, we found ourselves on a rocky outcrop along the spine of the Blue Ridge, with the terrain falling off sharply to the left and to the right; and, standing there, with the wind blowing, it was almost as if we were flying, like Leonardo DiCaprio on the bow of the Titanic; and, we could swoop down into the Shenandoah Valley on one side or central Virginia on the other.

It was an incredible sensation, and our time on top of that mountain, straddling that peak, helped me understand why mountains have long been considered mystical and sacred. There is something special and unique about being that high up, where heaven and earth seem to touch. The air is pure and clean and invigorating, and there is a sense of peace and quiet that provides a different perspective on life, one you cannot glimpse from down below. A friend of

mine who is an avid mountain climber says standing on top of a mountain you realize this was and is and always will be God's creation – that no man made this world – and you recognize what a small place we occupy in the vastness of God's universe.

I suppose it is no wonder, then, mountains appear throughout the Bible as places where people go to encounter God. During the Exodus, Moses went up the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments from God and returned with two tablets in his hand and his face shining like the sun. In First Book of Kings, the great prophet Elijah stood outside a mountain cave to hear the still, small voice of God as God passed by the mountain. And, in our gospel story this morning, it was on a mountaintop that Jesus was transfigured right in front of the disciples, confirming for them everything they believed in their hearts.

Mountains are holy places, but they are not the only places where we can have deeply spiritual experiences. Because we believe God is not far off and remote but is present and near to each and every one of us, we can encounter God almost anywhere. It could be on a mountaintop, but it could just as easily be on the beach, or a big city street, or strolling through the park. We might meet God in a traditionally sacred space like a church or a cathedral, or we might find God in a place that is not considered “religious” at all.

The truth is we never know when God may appear. God has a way of showing up at the most unlikely, unexpected times and places. We cannot plan to have a spiritual experience because nothing gets in the way of the Spirit more than planning and expectations. The Spirit appears when the Spirit wants, not when we want. Spiritual experiences just happen, all we can do is cultivate them by opening our hearts and souls through spiritual practices, which make us attentive to God's presence in the world.

I think that is the whole purpose of being part of a church community: to help us explore those spiritual practices; to open our hearts and souls so we can see God. The Bible shows us that spiritual formation take place in community. Community is essential to our knowing and experiencing God. Our connection with God is not just a one-on-one, individual relationship but is inextricably linked to those around us, to our family and friends, to our neighbors and the wider community. How we relate to all those people affects our relationship with God, and how we relate to God affects our relationship to all those people around us.

Henri Nouwen, the well-known spiritual guide and writer, puts it this way:

Christian spirituality not only flows from community but creates community. It nurtures the life of the Spirit within us, and among us. The Spirit of God dwells in the center of our heart and is the center of our life together. Indeed, what is most personal proves to be the most public; what is the most nourishing for our individual lives proves to be the best food for our lives as the people of God... It is therefore not surprising that prayer and community are always found

together, because the Spirit who prays in us is the Spirit who binds us together into one body."¹

Here at Grace, we aspire to nurture that kind of Christian spirituality. We believe that Grace Church is called to be that "city on a hill" where people of all races and cultures can come to build their relationship with God and with others. That is our *Vision for the Future*, and we live out that vision through our diversity, which offers us a glimpse of God's kingdom, through our worship and music, our education programs, the way we actively embrace the voices of all children, knowing that children have a special place in God's heart, and also through our outreach ministries, which are centered on social justice.

In our Annual Report, you can read more specifically about the work of our many ministries and the opportunities for spiritual growth, and during the upcoming season of Lent, you can explore our faith by participating in Dinner Church, or an online prayer group, by joining as we read the Gospels, or taking an introductory class on the Episcopal Church.

We do all of this, all of these ministries and programs, to open the hearts and souls of everyone who comes through our doors. We want everyone to feel the unconditional love of God. We want everyone to have a mountaintop experience, that moment of epiphany, when you know God is real, and near and present, and God loves you for who you are. That is why we are here. That is why Grace Church exists: to share God's love with the world.

Amen.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation*.