

Homily – The Mountain Top and the Pit

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I don't usually preach on current events. There are so many current events, that I usually stick with preaching about God, and how we can live into our spiritual journeys. But, like many of you I have been struck over the head with the invasion of the Ukraine by Russia. Yes, the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were tragedies. I can't point a finger at Russia without looking in the mirror at what we have done. Yes, I realize there is an aspect of white privilege in my concerns about the Ukraine when there are so many other heartbreaks in Asia and Africa. But, I still wanted to start this sermon today by acknowledging and calling out the bravery of the Ukrainian people and the ruthlessness of Putin's Russia. Since Christ is in and around all, I wonder what is going on the heads and hearts of the Russian invaders. In a little while during our Prayers of the People we will pray for the Ukraine and for Russia. May there be peace. May there be love. May there be the holiness of God.

And meanwhile, here we are on our last Sunday in the season after Epiphany. For the last seven weeks we have been celebrating the growth of the light of Jesus. We started with the coming of the wise ones as they followed the star, and today we conclude this season with our annual retelling of the transfiguration of Jesus. "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. ..., a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" In this transfiguration Bible story Jesus is not changed, but he is revealed as the Son of God. This is a story that is meant to share the glory and majesty of Jesus. It is an exciting story that is an archetypal mountain top high. Another mountain top high was when Moses went up in the mountains to see the burning bush, and later after the exodus from Egypt when Moses went up a mountain again to get the Ten Commandments. Mountain top experiences are often the high points of our lives. They are when everything is good. Our souls are bursting with joy, and we can sense the presence of God around us. We feel connected to the universe. When we look back at a mountain top high we remember feeling more alive. There is a sense of holiness, and there is often a deep desire to relive the experience. I pray that you have these beautiful mountain top experiences in your own life.

However, we all know that most of life is not a mountain top high. Most days are more mundane, more repetitive, and less memorable. Much of life is all of those other places we go when we are not on a mountain top, and I think we must treasure

these ordinary times, appreciate an ordinary meal, be grateful for a night's sleep, thank God for a functioning furnace.

Liminal space is a term that I have introduced before, and it is that special moment in time in which we feel connected to all that is around us. Liminal moments are when we feel we are standing at the threshold of infinity. It may occur as you are watching a baby play, or hearing music that inspires. Poetry can often be effective in helping us get outside ourselves. If you let it then well done poetry touches us inside the heart. Thunderstorms are not something that we have very often here in California, and I miss them. For me, thunderstorms and heavy snow storms are moments in which life seems to pause, and we are reminded there are things that are much larger, much grander.

Here are other evocative moments. Sometimes we have moments when we are selfless in love with another. And, sometimes a sight, smell or taste can evoke a deep memory of wholeness and contentment. This sense of serenity is more than a feeling. It is a connectedness that is essentially a glimmer of the Holy Spirit. It reflects the truth that we were created to be in relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. Liminal moments happen with a mountain top high, but we err when we don't see them at other times as well. This is one of the things I hope to help correct as we remember the transfiguration of Jesus. All of life is sacred.

Now, if you look at the history of all religions, they almost all begin with one massive mistake. They make a clean split between the sacred and the profane. Then all the emphasis is placed on going to the sacred spaces, creating sacred time and sacred actions, and 98% of life then remains unsacred. This is why so many people have such a hard time encountering the holy. We were told to look for God only in very few places and times. When you build so many churches and shrines, God is seemingly only there. When you emphasize holy liturgies, all of life stops being a liturgy. Wise ones have learned to see beauty in the mundane, and sacred in the everyday. All of our lives are meant to reflect back the holiness of God.

The correct distinction is never between sacred and profane, but only between sacred and desecrated places, people, and things. It is we alone who desecrate God's one incarnate world by our inability to see truthfully, to see the depth of things, and to show a reverence that comes quite naturally. When we do see and show reverence, then it is one sacramental universe, and everything, absolutely everything, can be a gate, a window, and a door to the sacred and holy. As we retell the story of the mountain top transfiguration of Jesus, let us remember that every moment in life can be sacred and holy, if we let it.

However, today does not seem very sacred or holy in the Ukraine. Instead, today seems scary. Life and death hang in the balance, and it seems that the better word for today is desecrated. The invasion by Russia seems to have taken God from the land. From a distance you and I have the luxury to know that God is still present, even in the midst of war. However, in the immediacy of the emergency and as the missiles and bullets are flying, it can be quite hard to sense the sacred. There are many holy people in the Ukraine, and for that matter in Russia. The Orthodox tradition is the second largest Christian tradition in the world, just smaller than the Roman Catholic tradition, and just larger than our Anglican tradition. The Orthodox tradition is very strong in the Ukraine, and I pray that as war descends, that the holy people are still able to show the light of Christ to a weary people. For those in the invading army I pray that they remember the love of God. I am told that battle can be both fearful and invigorating. The events can seem larger than life. But it is not the glorious experience of the mountain top. Instead the Russian invaders are in the midst of a similar but vastly different experience. It is an experience that I will call the pit. Yes, both the mountain top and the pit are remembered for the rest of one's life. Yes, both are turning points. They both may even be full of adrenaline and endorphins. But, a mountain top experience is full of God, and the pit is not. I am not one who believes that an angry God sends sinners to eternal damnation in the pits of Hell. However, it is useful to understand the Russian invasion as the opposite of the mountain top. The pit is that larger than life experience in which we push God away in ourselves and in others. I pray that you never experience this pit, but if you do, know that God still loves you. God still loves the Russian invaders, and even their leaders. But, their actions in the pit are to stop. With the cessation of Russian hostilities, holiness will once again be revealed.

Before I conclude today I want to, once again, use Brené Brown's new book, *Atlas of the Heart*, to examine the emotions that we feel in watching the unfolding invasion by Russia. How do we feel when watching the pit? In these times it is normal for us to feel anger, disgust, contempt, and even self-righteousness as we condemn the Russian invaders. These are all places we go when we feel wronged or see others being wronged. These emotions may cause us to take action, but at such a distance most of us will only take action through surrogates. However, there is another set of emotions that come into play. As Brené Brown says in her book, as we increase our emotional awareness we increase our well-being and maintain more control over our emotions. And the other set of emotions are the places we go with others. And, the primary emotion here is compassion.

Compassion is the daily practice of recognizing and accepting our shared humanity so that we can treat ourselves and others with loving kindness, and we take action in the face of suffering. Compassion is fueled by understanding and accepting that we are all made of strength and struggle, no one is immune to pain and suffering. When we

practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience our fear of pain. Compassion practice is daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us. When cultivating compassion, we draw from the wholeness of our life experience, our suffering, our empathy, as well as our joys. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity and the Christ that is in and around all.

Now let me introduce you to a new term, near enemy. The far enemy of compassion might be cruelty. What's interesting is that near enemies are often greater threats than far enemies because near enemies are more difficult to recognize. The near enemy of compassion is pity. Instead of feeling the openness of compassion, pity says "oh, that poor person. I feel sorry for people like that." Pity sees those other people as different from ourselves. It sets up a separation between ourselves and others, a sense of distance and remoteness from the suffering of others. Compassion on the other hand, recognizes the suffering of another as a reflection of our own pain. Compassion says "I understand this, I suffer in the same way." Compassion is empathetic. It has a mutual connection with the pain and sorrow of life. Compassion is shared suffering. Conversely, there's nothing worse than feeling pitied. It feels so isolating. Pity involves four elements, a believe that the suffering person is inferior, a passive, self-focused reaction that does not include providing help, a desire to maintain emotional distance, and avoidance of sharing in the other person's suffering. As followers of Jesus the appropriate emotion for us to have in the face of the pit is compassion. We have compassion for the Ukrainian people, and dare I say, even compassion for the people of Russia.

So, like Jesus that day, I pray that you have mountain top experiences of God and the Holy. In addition I pray that you see the sacred and holy in all the mundane parts of life. I pray that you avoid the pit, the killer of holiness and dwell in compassion. And, I pray for the health, safety and well-being of all those who are in harm's way. Like us, they too are the beloved of God.