

March 6, 2011
Matthew 17:1-9
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Mountaintop to Ministry

Mountaintop experiences come in all shapes and sizes, all colors and contexts. Some of them are common to many of us and some of them are very individual. For those of us who thrive on education, the thrill of learning something new makes our day. For those of us who are relationally oriented, maybe it is holding a new grandchild for the first time, or falling in love again, when you thought that part of your life was over. Or maybe it is receiving a deep reassuring message that unexplainably says all will be well when all seems to be falling apart. And sometimes it is taking the time to commune with nature, maybe on a mountaintop.

As I stood on the mountaintop - well, actually maybe hilltop is more appropriate - on the Isle of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, I had a 360-degree view. It was breathtaking and deeply moving. To the west and south there were pastoral views of sheep in open fields on the island leading down to the ocean, which then extended as far as the eye could see. To the east was the Iona Abbey where people have been worshipping for centuries and the small village of Iona sheltered in the narrow strait separating the island from the rest of Scotland. To the north were cattle grazing in the fields and off in the distance was Staffa Island on which is the cave that inspired the Romantic composer Mendelssohn to write the piece known as Fingal's Cave Overture (It had been amazing to be in

that cave.) To state the obvious, it was a mountaintop experience, and I, like Peter in today's reading, would have been happy to put up a tent, although at my age I would prefer something with a more substantial bed, and stay awhile. That desire, obviously shared by many who visit Iona, was symbolized by the enormous cairn of stones left by thousands of people to mark our time there.

I suspect most of you can recall a similar experience from your own life. Whether it is a mountaintop or an ocean side, deep within the woods or out in the open of the plains or desert, we know what it is to be stopped in our tracks by the mystical presence of the Holy in the world around us.

When we have mystical experiences - in nature, or a mystical encounter with light or a voice (a message) as described in today's story, the inclination is to want to hold on. The highs in life are so much more enticing than the lows. It is a natural inclination to want to hold on to the enriching and reassuring experiences, to stay on that mountaintop.

Indeed, Jesus did take Peter, James and John up that mountain. But he won't let them stay there. He brings them right back down again, to engage in the ministries at hand - teaching and healing, protesting and praying.

In recent weeks we have been watching villages around the world where the mountaintop experiences and the challenges of ministry are all in the same place. For example, Tahrir square in Egypt is one place where the mountaintop experience of standing for freedom is now living with the challenges of how to shape a new government and a new culture.

In reality, mountaintops and ministry are intertwined. Most of us feel we are very fortunate to live in Midcoast Maine. It is a wonderful area. We are blessed with close interaction with nature as well as many educational and artistic riches, and of course great people. Maine the way life should be.

But I want to tell you about a conversation that some local clergy had with the president and dean of Bowdoin College a couple of weeks ago. The college officials shared with us their concern about what I call "drive by" harassment that some of the students have experienced in our downtown. By "drive by" I mean people yelling out of car or truck windows at them. These verbal assaults are generally about race or sexual orientation. One of the real challenges about these kinds of experiences is that by the time you realize what has happened, whether you are the target of such insults or just standing there, the perpetrator is gone and you have no way to respond directly to them. So people are simply left with fear and anger.

I know that feeling. I remember as a young teenager when I walked into town there was a man who sometimes stood at his fence and made inappropriate comments to young girls as they walked by. I learned I didn't want to walk

downtown. We don't want college students to feel that way about walking downtown here.

In talking with Geoff about this, he shared that our youth group was yelled at down on the mall recently. I have observed this behavior more than once when I have been downtown. It is obviously more prevalent in good weather. However, I usually can't tell who is yelling what at whom. It is hard to know what to do when we are passersby in such situations. Maybe the most important thing is to stand with the one who has been hurt.

Like the four-year-old child, who when he saw his elderly neighbor, whose wife had recently died, crying in the back yard. The little boy went over, climbed in the man's lap and just sat there. When the boy's mother later asked him what he said, the little boy replied, "Nothing, I just helped him cry."

When we think someone has been hit by a 'drive by' harassment, maybe we could risk going over to the student or whomever, ask them how they are and tell them we are glad they are here. In any way we can, we need to make it clear that such harassment is not welcome here. It is not welcome anywhere.

When we come down off the mountaintops, there are many ministries that call on our time and our gifts. Overtime, we can get worn out. So it is important to complete the circle. We need to go back to the mountaintop so that we can be encouraged and refreshed for the living of these days, for our ministries, as we express the love of God in the world.