

I'm a people-watcher. I love watching how people carry themselves, how their expression changes when they are deep in thought, how they interact with others.

My favorite place to do this is the airport. Pre-9/11, before all the security checkpoints and when random people like me could just go and sit at the gates, I would pack my journal in my bag, grab a snack, and sit and watch.

There were plenty of grumpy businessmen, rushing from here to there, checking their watches every 30 seconds and muttering about connecting flights. There were older couples, clearly on vacation, lovingly fussing over (and sometime not-so-lovingly fussing at) one another as they juggled hats and handbags. There were moms, visibly stressed out, dragging along a toddler on a leash who wanted nothing more than to stand and look around, invariably with their mouth hanging open and desperately needing their nose to be wiped. (The kid, not the mother.)

There were others there, too. There was the guy in camos, returning home on leave, getting smothered by the people who love him most ... the metallic "welcome home" balloons the family brought getting tangled up with the bouquet of flowers he holds for his mom. There are squeals of delight and tears of joy, and the loud clap-clap of a man-hug.

But airports are not always places of joy and reunion. Not 20 feet away that day was a young couple, balloon-less and much more subdued. They, too, are shedding tears which fall down their faces and to the floor unnoticed; two more noses needing to be wiped. They are standing forehead to forehead, the young man speaking gently as his hands reach up to cup her face; he initiates eye contact, but she cannot bear it. Her eyes close and a sob escapes.

Mountain and valley juxtaposed. The joy of long-awaited reunion a counterpoint to the grief this pair is clearly enduring.

Here we are, at the brink of Lent, turning with Jesus toward Jerusalem and the mount of Calvary, with Peter, James and John atop another mountain ...

The disciples wait and watch while Jesus prays. Drunk with fatigue, they witness something so intense and powerful, so transformative and awe-inspiring that they are befuddled and have no idea how to respond.

When I hear this story of Jesus up on the mountain, with the apparition of Moses and Elijah, men who represent the Law and the prophets, I hear the echo of Jesus saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>1</sup>

At any rate, Peter, trying to be helpful, suggests honoring what transpired by erecting three separate monuments for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

But God interrupts Peter’s ramblings. He’s missed the point. (He’ll often miss the point.) God, however, makes it plain: “This is my Son, my chosen. Listen to him.”

‘This is my Son, my chosen one.’ Sound familiar? As Jesus emerged from the waters of the River Jordan, “a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved.’”<sup>2</sup> God’s proclamation of Jesus’ place in the cosmic order occurred when Jesus began his public ministry, and again now as he sets his face toward Jerusalem and the events that will culminate in his crucifixion.

The voice from the cloud goes on to say, “Listen to him.” This is what God asks of the disciples. This is what God asks of us. Again, I hear that echo: love God, love neighbor, love self.

The next day, Jesus and the three disciples traipse back down the mountain and encounter another father who dearly loves his only son. The child is suffering, the father clearly tormented by that suffering.

From the midst of a crowd, the father said, “This is my only child. [Please, heal him.]”

Two fathers speak out to us this morning – one from a cloud and the other from the crowd – “My son, my beloved son!” “Listen to him before it’s too late.” “Heal him before it’s too late.”

Mountaintop and valley juxtaposed. The foreshadowing of the crucifixion on the mountaintop is the counterpoint to the anticipation of restoration in the valley.

Positioning this healing story just after the transfiguration, Luke drives home the point that “God’s voice was heard during that glorious episode up on the mountain, but God’s

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 22:37-40

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:22 ~ baptism of Jesus

power continues to be dramatically revealed in what happens below, where people are suffering.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus is headed toward his death. God doesn't want the beloved Son to suffer. And yet Jesus will suffer. Because that's who he is ... the one who endures it all so that we don't have to ... the one who dies so that we can live.

Likewise, the man down below does not want *his* beloved son to suffer, and yet.... So Jesus takes this child, heals him, and gives him back to his father, giving us a glimpse of the day when Jesus will take hold of us, heal us, and return us to God.

My husband shared an interesting thought the other night. He said the two extremes (the highest high of the mountaintop and the lowest low of the valley) are not that dissimilar. At neither place are we able to do the work, we can only receive. Peter up on that mountain was more or less useless. He was positioned in a place where he was purely a recipient of God's grace and power; standing there, in that strange, thin place between sleep and wakefulness, he felt intensely close to the presence of the living God, observing a kind of power he had not ever witnessed before. Consequently, he wanted to memorialize that moment, freeze it in time so that the experience could in some way be accessed whenever wanted.

Conversely, the father down at the base of the mountain felt stuck in a holding pattern of despair, that numb-yet-agonized zombie-like place of desperation, unable to alleviate the suffering of his child. The power of God seemed inaccessible to them. They occupied the spiritual valley each of us dreads.

In both extremes, the faithful who are gathered are unable to meaningfully act. They are paralyzed by awe or despair. It's as though those extreme situations are unreal, dream-like, bridled by the illusion of God's nearer or more removed presence.

Most of our lives are lived in the in-between, neither always on the mountaintop nor perpetually in the depths of the valley. And it's in those in-between places where most of the work gets done. That's where the faithful can be agents of grace and healing, as well as recipients, and can bear witness to the presence and grace of God at all times and in all places. Those in-between places are where the faithful are mobilized to care for the sick and widowed, the friendless and those in need. Where they can proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seek and serve Christ in all persons, and work

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Huey

for justice and peace among all people. Not that we can't receive God's grace in these in-between spaces, but we are more able to act, to give, tend to others.

God says, 'listen to him.' Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

When we find ourselves at those extreme high or low places, we can trust that God is still present, no further from us than our breath, as is always true, whatever terrain we traverse. (To borrow imagery from our other scripture readings), sometimes the veil is lifted, and we can see clearly the glory of God, culminating in an intense mountaintop experience. At other times, the veil of grief, anxiety, shame, or fear obscures our perception of God's presence.

Each Sunday morning, I am stunned by the landscape of our altar rail. Pregnant mamas kneeling next to grieving widows, anxiety-ridden teenagers next to carefree toddlers and wizened seniors. Each with hands extended, often with grateful whispers of 'thanks be to God' and 'amen' as the Sacrament is received. Hungry hearts and joyful hearts and doubting hearts, smooshed up next to each other, each trusting that God is tending to them, blessing them, transforming them.

The man in camos engulfed in joy and the couple enshrouded by grief know the grace and beauty and blessing of love. They also know the pain and hurt and despair of loss. As I sat in my own space between the mountaintop and the valley that afternoon, I was particularly blessed to witness one of the joyful bunch approach the couple and offer them the sacrament of Kleenex.

God doesn't want us to linger high up on the mountain, erecting monuments in a futile attempt to harness the power of a moment, but rather God calls us back down to be with those who need our witness of God's glory. Similarly, God also does not want us perpetually wallowing in the depths of the valley, but rather offers us healing and grace, calling us up from the isolation of despair into community.

Thanks be to God. And amen.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> \*\*I stumbled over this during my sermon prep:

The Hebrew word for birthing stool is "mashber". It comes from the Hebrew root "to shatter" or "break". Giving birth is difficult, painful, dangerous. But what emerges is life and beauty. The Hebrew word for crisis is "mashber". Same word. Same root. Same lesson. With every painful and difficult crisis, something new and beautiful can be born. Out of crisis can come a new beginning. If we help birth it. ~ Written by V. Urecki, giving credit to ideas taught by Rabbis Ora Nitkin-Kaner and Jonathan Sacks