One of the ways to better understand scripture is to put yourself in the role of one of the characters in the passage and imagine what it must have been like to be that person as the story unfolds. Consider the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. I can imagine myself as the wounded man on the road from Jericho to Jerusalem to better understand what it means to be ignored or to receive help when in grave danger. I can put myself in the place of the priest or Levite rather easily because I know firsthand the sense of urgency and obligation to one’s responsibilities that might cause me to think that if I have to travel on, the guy behind me will stop and help. I can put on the sandals of the Samaritan and take in the potential dangers inherent in stopping to help a Jew then push those reasons aside and stop anyway. And I can even imagine the shock of the innkeeper when this Samaritan shows up with a badly injured Jew on his donkey, offering to pay for his room, and promising more if he needed.

Considering the story of the Transfiguration, I would not mind being James or John or even Peter to witness what Jesus experienced on the mountain. Even fumbling around and misunderstanding the meaning of the event altogether as Peter did would be worth that sojourn on the mountaintop with Jesus and Moses and Elijah.

In the story which follows, when Jesus and his companions descend the mountain and are greeted by an enormous crowd, I can also find plenty of people with whom to relate. The father is distraught and desperate, worried to death over the safety of his young son. I can relate to his perspective. The boy is in a bad way with this demon (probably epilepsy) beating him up and threatening his very life. I fortunately have not had to deal with a life-threatening illness, but I know plenty of people who have and I think I can understand some of the realities with which they live. The disciples are an all too familiar group for me. They are in a tight spot because they tried but could not heal the boy. They can’t seem to do their job right and Jesus accuses them of not having enough faith. They are probably hiding out on the edges of the vast crowd and I can easily put myself in their place. I think I
could even switch places with Jesus for a moment, at least to the extent that he expresses his agitation and impatience with the situation. After all, he has been on the mountaintop and experienced the glory of God. No sooner has he come down the mountain than he is met with a big problem he is expected to solve. Somehow I suspect that most of us could put ourselves in the role of Jesus at this point.

It is ironic that so often when we enjoy some high in life, some experience that causes our spirits to soar, soon after we seem to run into some challenge that deflates our bubble of happiness and drains our renewed energy. I suppose it is a good thing to have those great experiences to prepare us for the challenges that seem to lie in wait for us.

The story of The Transfiguration has long been a model of the so-called “mountaintop experience.” Jesus and his closest disciples go up the mountain to find a quiet place apart from the noise and demands of day to day responsibilities. That opportunity in itself is a gift. To the disciples surprise, however, Jesus’ appearance begins to change and the two great prophets in their tradition–Moses and Elijah–appear with him. They talk about the way in which Jesus will fulfill his mission and are surrounded by the glory of God. Although they are exhausted and eager to sleep, Peter, James, and John stay awake for this experience. They are immediately reminded of those occasions when Moses went up the mountain to commune with God and when Elijah sought refuge on the mountain following his contest with the priests of Ba’al. It was such an amazing experience that they did not speak of it in the days which immediately followed.

Surely the trip back down the mountain was just as memorable. Even if they did not discuss the experience with the prophets, they must have been excited and shared other stories that bonded them even closer. The last miles of a journey back home tend to bring people together in a happy and nostalgic way as we try to hold onto the last bit of that good feeling of being together.

Then the crowd shows up. The demands roll in. The phone rings and it is back to life as usual. Oh well, at least it was nice on the mountain.

Throughout this season of Lent we are looking for the paradoxes of our faith. As I said before, it is ironic that often when we have enjoyed a spiritual high we are quickly brought down by the day-to-day challenges of life. There is no paradox there. Where, then, is the paradox in this story? Where is the
peace amid the chaos of the crowd, the father and son, the disciples, and this
demonic turmoil that has everyone, including Jesus, upset?

The paradox is indeed that we can experience peace in the midst of chaos. Jesus embodies that paradox for he handles the turmoil with calm and assurance. He is agitated, you might point out. He is frustrated with his disciples and their lack of faith. True, but here is another aspect of the paradox of peace: peace is not the absence of conflict or a sense of agitation. Peace is a sense of confidence and assurance that permeates even the most trying of situations and allows us to function sensibly and faithfully in the midst of the chaos. As one of my coffee cups reminds me: “Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those things and still be calm in your heart.”

A few weeks ago we talked about that occasion when Moses descended the mountain the first time with the tablets and found the Hebrew people worshiping a golden calf they had made. There was no sense of peace as Moses smashed the tablets in anger and punished the people for their disobedience. The second time he came down the mountain was different for everyone was in a frame of mind that yielded peaceful results.

We are all too familiar with the kinds of chaos that can erupt in our lives. On a global scale we deal with war and natural disasters, with terrorist attacks and financial upheaval, with epidemics of disease and hunger, poverty and illiteracy, oppression and the abuse of fellow humans. We know what happens when infighting takes over a company, a community, a church, or a family. We experience firsthand the turmoil of the loss of a job, problems with our children, personal insecurity, the breakdown of relationships, even the loss of our faith. How can we find peace in the midst of all this chaos?

Certainly Jesus and his disciples show us the way. While we do not have to find a remote spot on a mountain where the glory of God might suddenly appear, it is important for us to retreat from time to time to commune with God and refresh our spirits. Lent begins with the story of Jesus going off alone in the wilderness to pray and reflect. Sure enough, after that good experience the Tempter arrived and threatened to ruin all the good it had done for Jesus. His own sense of peace, his being centered in the Spirit of God, and his confidence in who he was as the Son of God enabled him to dispense the Tempter in short order.
Find a time each day or several times a week when you can pray and reflect. Read scripture and allow it to tell God’s story to you. You do not have to understand it all, but the truth is you will understand far more of it than you think you will. Listen to music that soothes your soul and talk to friends who bring out the best in you. Think about what God has done in your life and the ways in which you feel blessed. Cultivate a sense of gratitude that spills over into daily life. I read a devotion the other day written by someone who, instead of answering “Fine” to the regular question of “How are you today?” began responding, “Thankful.” He received a mix of responses, but it offered him an opportunity to express his gratitude for even the small things in life that make a difference to us and are given generously by God.¹

Cultivating a regular time of communion with God is helpful in obtaining a sense of peace. Study of scripture is also helpful. As I said, you will understand far more of the Bible if you will simply open it and read it. In it you will discover a rich history of God’s relationship with his people. You will discover yourself in the stories that have been handed down to us through the centuries. After all, as the writer of Ecclesiastes discovered, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Although the particulars are different, humans throughout time have experienced the same kinds of things over and over. Learn how your ancestors in the faith handled situations with which you are faced. Discover their successes and failures and learn how to fashion your own peaceful responses to life.

Do not try to go it alone. Although he certainly had adequate resources at his disposal, Jesus rarely went anywhere or did anything alone. He relied on his disciples to support him and help him. While they did not always do things the way he wanted, they were there for him. Even when they deserted before his crucifixion, they were there after his resurrection and were faithful to his command to share his Gospel with the world. We are living proof of their ultimate faithfulness and reliability. Keep friends close and depend upon them for counsel, for support, and for comfort.

Above all, and this was Jesus’ point of contention with his disciples, keep your faith focused upon God. We can trust God to be always present with us, to provide all we need in any circumstance, to keep us strong and resourceful, confident and hopeful. As the Apostle Paul who was imprisoned, beaten, scorned, mocked, and frequently chased out of town discovered,

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“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4-9).

I think we can relate to just about every role in the story of Jesus dealing with the crowd and the epileptic boy. We have seen such experiences from every angle. If we have not seen it from the perspective of Jesus, we can. Although we may not understand it, God through Christ offers us a sense of peace that can indeed permeate any chaos life throws at us. It is the peace of assurance that God is with us and we are not alone. And that experience is worth a thousand mountaintop visits with Moses and Elijah. Whatever your chaos in life, God offers peace. Thanks be to God.
February 24, 2013  

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We gather in this place week by week seeking your presence, O God, our Good Shepherd, because we long to know your voice and to listen with our hearts. We also come searching for answers, for community, for reassurance, and for peace. We are called to a life of faith and discipleship, but sometimes your call implies more than we bargained for. The world would measure success and happiness by quantity: what is the biggest, the most, the best; and convince us that we can be masters of our own destiny. But Christ has called his followers to life in a kingdom whose economy is measured by obedience and joy and compassion. Where the world tells us to do whatever we must to remain in control and get ahead, Jesus teaches that the last will be first, that the greatest faith grows from the tiniest of seeds, that true power is found in vulnerability, that those willing to give the most will, in turn, gain the whole world.  O God, grant us the grace to hear your call above the flattery and deception of other messages that beckon to us, and give us the courage to follow you instead of chasing after attractions and accolades that are temporary. Make us attentive to the sound of your voice. Grant us wisdom to discern your truth. Give us endurance and creativity to work toward the vision of your kingdom.

We have only to look around us, O Lord, throughout this community and around our world, to see the needs that surround and sometimes overwhelm us. Images on the evening news are stark reminders of places where violence and corruption and oppression threaten to rob your children of life and security and freedom. We pray that you would make of us messengers of your peace. Even in our land where opportunities are available and resources are abundant, there are dark corners where poverty and hopelessness seem to reign. We pray that you would grant us generous and compassionate hearts in the face of such need. Among our own number there are many who are plagued by illness, crippled by grief or haunted by fear. We pray that you would empower us to bring healing and offer comfort. Within our own circle of friends and family, there are needs of body, mind and spirit which we want to meet but which leave us feeling depleted and helpless. We pray that you would enable us to offer words of hope and to share your love and mercy in ways that will bring assurance to these for whom we pray that they are not alone in their struggle. Grant to each of us, O Lord, grace for this day and hope for all our days to come. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.

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