

DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

This message is Not about Downhill skiing. (That event was delayed until tomorrow).

Yes, the Olympics are happening, and yes... today is Valentine's Day– a secular holiday named after a saint, but **more importantly**, today is Transfiguration Sunday– the Sunday before Lent. Well,..... for the next few minutes, I hope, the Biblical Mountain experience is more important.

Both the New and Old Testament passages feature very prominent figures on a mountain. ... Needless to say, these are momentous events!

Moses was up on Mount Sinai with God, and we are told that when he came down holding the two tablets of the covenant, that the skin of his face shone..... Because he had been with GOD. His shining face was such a distraction to others, that Moses had to cover his face with a veil while he spoke with others. He glowed with that “Mountain top experience”. Moses had been with God!

Jesus also had a Mountain top experience with God, and it changed the appearance of his faceand his overall appearance, too. James, John and Peter were with Jesus on the mountain, but it wasn't their “mountain top” experience. They were just casual observers – very casual, as they were tired and even slept some of the time.

Poor Peter, he seemed to have an unfortunate knack for falling asleep at the wrong time or saying the wrong thing. This time, he does both. Struggling against “closing eyelids”, Peter yells out, “Let's build a shelter for everyone.” Peter's advice did not start a church into a building program because a Stronger voice–the voice of God–was heard, and that made the mere mortals very afraid. *Sometimes mountain tops can be unnerving.*

God said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!

And then, they all came down from the mountain.

In 1981, I climbed to the top of a mountain. It was Old Horn Mountain, which is in the Tonquin Valley, in Jasper National Park. Although it was not a huge mountain, the climb was an arduous experience. I began the ascent from our campsite, above the tree line, and it still took over half a day to get to the summit.

The view was unbelievable. All the other mountains appeared to grow larger as my elevation increased, and then more and more mountains would appear off in the distance.

At the top, the panorama was beyond what I imagined, yet what really surprised me was the absence of all noise, but the wind. The wind didn't howl, but rather was a hush sound that took all other sounds away.

It felt like silence at the edge of heaven, and I was filled with awe.

After taking in the moment, I began my descent because I was worried about darkness catching me before I reached my campsite, and.... there really isn't much else to do on top of a mountain.

That was my physical mountain top experience, and it was most impressive; however, it doesn't compare to "real" mountain top experiences.

As you know, a "mountain top experience" is more a literary device or a descriptive term than an actual physical time on a mountain.

Overcoming hardships, witnessing our children succeeding or ...fulfilment, or being completing aware– in awe.... are better examples for a "mountain top" experience.

And, of course there is the spiritual sense / Biblically understanding, too, which is the state of being close or with God in a special and important way.

Whatever the reason, a mountain top experience is typically filled with awe, wonder, delight, euphoria and / or extreme joy, and.... more.

It is a transcendent experience.

Much is made of the climb up: the struggle, the sacrifice and the conquest. Yet, it is the moment of "shining" that truly radiates above all else.

For example, an outstanding performance may be moving, yet it is the moment of standing out on the top step, receiving the gold medal that will be remembered long after the performance.

A mountain top experience is just that: the experience / the feeling / the sensation–the awareness of being there.

And,..... as we all know, no one stays on the mountain top, not even Moses or Jesus stayed there.

All will come down, down to real time, down to regular time , down to "common time."

The season of Lent can be a reality check..... to get us ready for living in the common time.

Many of us have never had a true mountain top experience, yet we understand what it is,..... and likely we would enjoy having such an experience.

Those who have had a mountain top experience, probably long for more– a return to the mountain.

Even so, our best efforts to fabricate the experience all fall short. We can not orchestrate the experience, and spiritually speaking, I don't think we can earn it either..... Yet, we try to.....

For example, worship services are a time to gather as believers, to connect, to learn, to give, and most importantly, to worship God.

However, I've been to some church services that openly tried to create a Mountain top experience, and those attending would leave disappointed if they didn't get some sort of high out of it.

We can't live on the mountain top and I don't believe we can conjure up the experience, either.

Nevertheless, most of us have trouble being content.... living in common time / in the everyday mundane. We want to soar. We want to shine. We want to be moved and to inspire others to be moved beyond the mundane.

We want to feel more than what we are feeling.... in common time.

For example, when I write the final draft of a sermon, I'll listen to Mozart as I'm writing.

I think it helps me focus, and to be *moved* a little.

Of course I pray a lot too, even so,.... Mozart seems to give me a little zest and clarity as I'm searching for words to use.

In the past, I've tried Beethoven and Wagner, but they were a bit too intense.... and my sermons ... tended to get a little weird. So, I stick to Mozart.

The Great theologian, Karl Barth, was also an admirer of Mozart's music, yet it really bothered him that Mozart rejected Protestantism.

Mozart said, "Protestantism was all in the head."

I think Protestants find safety in "reason" / in logical thinking– in systematic theological. Our theology can be, at times, like wanting to build a tent while on the mountain with Jesus. We don't want to get too carried away, nevertheless, most of us still want to experience, from time to time, that elusive "spiritual high."

There is nothing wrong with desiring to be more spiritual, to be have a moment of emotional elation.... or to have a mountain top experience,..... as long as we are content with common time / with the day to day living.

Trouble and confusion often occurs when our discontent and our demons tempts us to create a high or makes us anxiously long for the thrills or need to be on top.

Valentine's Day is a prompt to recall / to revisit or reenact a time of high romantic energy, and that is fine.

We can nurture the seeds of romance, but we can not force or conjure it up on our own.

Romance happens in relationship, and it usually comes when vulnerability exposes mystery. And, like a mountain top experience, passionate romance can not be sustained..... because it depletes the mystery which is the fuel for romance.

As we know, romance can lead to intimacy and trust.... which is far better, ... because that is what feeds the soul and carries us through the day to day.

Marriage and sound relationships are more about growing together, than the temporary rush of romance. To be sure, it can be fun to pause and celebrate with flowers and chocolate,..... as we remember what truly is important– the growing together in trust, with real love in common time.

Too many people have forgotten that, and instead of climbing a mountain they fell into temptation and committed Adultery and broke their marital vows.

There are other temptations and traps for those who lust after the high, the zenith euphoria and fail to appreciate what really is important.

Over the next two weeks, we will hope for gold medals, and that is fine, I think. Yet, I wonder what happens to all those athletes who exhaust themselves in the pursuit, and fall short. And, does our devotion to athletic supremacy makes us responsible for their despair?

Can we strive to be our best as we live content in common time?
Can we rejoice while others are on the mountain, but not feed off them or expect them to do it for us?
When circumstances dictate, can we appropriately be sad, be content and rejoice in a healthy manner..... or do we long to only be on the mountain top?

Based on our pop culture, I'm inclined to think we are being fed one hyped up rush after another.

From the Grey cup, to the latest best movie, to a once in a life time concert, to Junior Championship games, to the Super bowl, to the Olympics and... to what next.

I think we are being conditioned to believe we can be placed on that mountain top almost all the time..... from one “must experience” event to the next.

And, please hear me: I'm not passing judgement on any of those activities. I plan to watch as much of the Olympics as the next person. Entertainment and competition can be fun,.....but it also can be much more.

Sometimes we push our kids too hard, and we must ask ourselves, “why.”
Sometimes we get caught up in the hype and hoopla, and we must ask why? Why do we need it?
Sometimes we expect worship service to bring us up and make us feel higher, and we must ask why we expect that.

Most of Life is lived in common time/ the every day, and the sooner we accept that the sooner we will live in peace and real joy.

As far as we know, Jesus experienced only ONE Transfiguration/ One mountain top experience. That time on the mountain with God was important, yet focussing on the mountain top is missing the point.

The value is NOT about being on the mountain with God.

Moses' mountain top experience proved to all that the message on the tablets was from God, and that Moses was telling the truth. That was the reason for Moses being on the mountain.

The Mountain time was just a way of affirming the message. The message is what is important, and not the time on the mountain.

The same is true with Jesus. The transfiguration / Jesus' mountain top experience presents proof that Jesus was God's special son and that we are to listen to Jesus.

The mountain top experience is merely God's seal of approval.
What is important / what is essential is the message that Jesus presented.

As soon as Jesus came down off the mountain, life went on / life continued in "common time."
In fact, Jesus' first encounter was not so pleasant,... so much for the afterglow.

But, that is NOT the point. The point of these verses are to get our attention so that we believe and accept Jesus' message – his life and teachings.

Jesus is the son of God.

Jesus' message–his life and teachings are critically important: THEY ARE FROM GOD to us, and so..... we better heed them.

Down from the mountain is receiving this message from God.

Therefore, we can rejoice and be glad when our athletes compete well; however, the worth and value of our nation does not depend on whether we receive gold medals or not.

We are judged by how we treat our enemies, nurture God's creation and care for the poor and powerless. That is what is important.

The level of entertainment in our worship service–the emotional highs produced are irrelevant beyond personal taste.

What is important is are we living and proclaiming the way of Christ.

Are we boldly presenting that Jesus is from God, and we need to be followers of Jesus and we need to know Jesus?

Christ's message of peace, justice, grace and love is what is important.
Are we doing peace and justice with grace and love?

Are we living God's message for us in the day to day / in common time?

I think we prairie people have an advantage over others. We live in a place without mountains. We understand that we can walk all day, and the scenery won't be any different. Geography has given us a gift of being grounded, of simplicity yet.... we are not immune from the grandeur temptation and the allure of idols, and the current trend in our province is for us to strive to be on top of others.

We don't live on mountain tops, nor did Jesus.
Jesus taught us to live to bring people up, instead of striving to look down on other. As Christ did, we lift up, even if it means we get lower.