

On the way down the mountain

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Last Sunday after the Epiphany, February 14, 2010.

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Luke 9:29

We all experience peaks and valleys in our journeys and cherish those spiritual mountaintop experiences that are part of our spiritual formation and development. Moses had his mountaintop experience on Mount Sinai when he received the law and the commandments. For him, it was the culmination of his call to lead God's people out of the wilderness. The glory of God appeared to him in a flaming bush and he remained there in awe for as long as he could before coming down the mountain to deliver the commandments to the people.

Peter, James and John have their heightened spiritual experience on the mountain when Jesus appears before them in mystical, dazzling brightness. With him are Moses, who represents the law, and Elijah, who represents the prophets. Their mystical presence affirms Jesus as the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets. It is a moment that Peter wants to preserve by building a dwelling place for each of them.

In the history of Israel, God is known in that mysterious luminous cloud that leads the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt and again in the giving of the law through Moses as well as in the Transfiguration of Christ. The appearance of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is a sign of the connection between the Old and the New Covenants. Jesus as the Christ of God is assured by Moses, the greatest of the lawgivers and confirmed by Elijah, the greatest of the prophets. If you go to that holy place today on that Mount of the Transfiguration you can feel a genuine sense of solitude and peace.

We all have those times when everything seems right with the world and wish that moment could be put on hold. We hold those special moments in our memory and want to preserve them for as long as we can. Saint Paul's moment of revelation occurred on the road to Damascus in his dramatic conversion from being a warrior against Christ to being a crusader for him. Such moments of personal revelation happen when the veil is drawn from our eyes to reveal a new understanding of how God is acting in our lives.

My own personal experience of revelation came as a college student when I found myself on my knees in prayer convinced of God's forgiveness for me personally. As I studied the scriptures and developed the discipline of prayer and sacrament, I began to apply the practical truth of the gospel to everyday living. I learned to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the everyday, even something as simple as a smile or an expression of appreciation given or received. It brought an inner calm that has sustained me through some difficult times.

We can't remain on the spiritual height of our mountaintop experiences for ever. Sooner or later we have to come back down to the reality of dealing with the everyday. It is because of those heightened spiritual experiences that we are strengthened to deal with the everyday. The gulf between the ideal and the actual is part of learning to live in the reality of a world beset with conflicting forces. We hold to the conviction that the power of God's love is greater than any evil, twisted mind that causes havoc, death and destruction. We take whatever experience we have with the holy and get on with the business of applying the spiritual to the temporal. A close, personal encounter with Christ changes and transforms us in a way that we are never again the same. An

experience with the Holy Spirit, whatever form it takes, is manifested in very real and practical ways. Not everyone has the same experience and not everyone's spiritual life is lived out the same.

The test of the descent down from the mountain top may even seem uphill. It is because of these very special moments of encountering God in the everyday that we become aware of God's extraordinary power working in the ordinary. It is when we come to know Christ as personal savior that we gain the confidence and strength to face the struggles between truth and falsehood, love and hatred, life and death.

As we journey through adolescence to adulthood, graduate from school and land our first job, meet and marry the one we love and are given the gift of children, we are sustained by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. It is in those times in which we are called to be our very best that we know that it is only by God's grace that we can be what God wants and knows that we can be. When we gather here each week to share in this great sacrament of the Eucharist we are moved beyond the ordinary to be in touch with the holy in all things.

Today we sing the last of the Alleluias until Easter. On Ash Wednesday this week, we begin the observance of the great forty days of Lent to prepare ourselves in heart and mind to recall the drama of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. The essential test of our faith is to move from the ashes of repentance to the triumph of Easter. Our mission is to know that we are loved and forgiven by God and respond by being more understanding and forgiving of others. We discover that every human being is of infinite value in the sight of God because of the one simple but profound truth that redemption is possible in all of us.

I am mindful that this is Valentine's Day. The legend is that on this day in the year 270 A.D., when the Christian church was under persecution, that Valentius, a Roman priest, was executed for encouraging people who were in love to marry and receive the blessing of the church. On the night before he died, he wrote a note to his jailer's daughter expressing his love for her and signed it, "From your Valentine."

If there is one thing I want for little Emily Margaret Bishop being baptized today is that unless we know what it means to love, nothing else makes sense. The heart of the message of the gospel is to be able to love others, especially those who are so difficult. The more we are able to reflect Christ's love in all our relationships, the better we come to know the holiness of God in all times, places and people.