

March 3, 2019
St. James, Portsmouth, VA
Last Sunday after Epiphany (RCL/C)
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Last weekend we had the Oscar Awards on TV. Did any of you watch the awards show? Had you been watching the Oscars 37 years ago in 1982 you would have seen and experienced a phenomenal set of awards. In 1981 a movie, based upon a true story, by the name of "Chariots of Fire" was released. At the Oscars the movie won the awards for Best Picture, Best Original Music Score, Best Original Screen Play and Best Costume Design. To refresh your memory, Chariots of Fire was about two athletes, both runners, who were competing in the 1920 Olympics in Paris, France. The two athletes, both from Great Britain, were Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams. Both men were to compete for a gold medal in the 100 yard run. However, Eric Liddell, the odds-on favorite to win and a devout Christian made the hard decision not to run in the 100 yard race because it was on Sunday, the Lord's day. Eric had determined that honoring the glory of God was more important than the glory he might receive by winning the race. He shifted events to the 440 yard run and actually won gold for his physical performance that race.

However Harold Abrahams, a Jewish man, persisted in the 100 yard race, happy that he would not have to compete against Eric Liddell. Through what was described as a Herculean effort, Abrahams won the race and therefore the gold medal.

Upon completion of the games all of the athletes from England, Abrahams among them, took a boat across the English Channel and then a train back to London. At Waterloo Station in London there was the bedlam of celebration over the very accomplished British athletes. Though everyone else spilled out onto the platform to receive their accolades, Harold Abrahams is shown to hold back, waiting to leave the rail car. As the crowd thinned out only Harold's bewildered girlfriend was standing alone wondering what had happened to him. The next scene shows Harold, still on the train, grasping his coveted medal. He had won. He achieved what he had set out to do. He had been on the mountain of fame and painfully realized that once he departed the train that he'd have to come down that mountain. He would have to leave the jubilant pinnacle of fame and re-enter the reality of the day.¹

I suppose that many of you have had your own mountain top experiences, and truth-be-known, may not have ever left the experience. How often have we known the 55 year old man who still revels in his high school days when he was a football stand out, whose name was in the Virginian Pilot every Saturday morning to praise his Friday night feats. Had it not been for the time he hurt his knee and could no longer play, he would have.... You can complete that sentence.

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158/plotsummary>. Accessed March 1, 2019.

But mountaintop experiences are not only about our personal achievements. Today it is fitting to talk and think about our spiritual mountaintops. Earlier this week in our weekly diocesan staff Bible study we were studying this passage of scripture. I asked our staff members to pause and think of their spiritual mountaintops. Slowly but surely they began to come forth with their stories. For one it had been the encounter she had with God in Christ during a Cursillo weekend at Chanco. For another the mountaintop had been in the midst of a physical rescue that he had orchestrated for a person in trouble on a waterway in Alaska when he could only give thanks to God for the wisdom and skill he had to save a life. As each told his or her story it was clear that in the telling of the story there was a real presence of both the remembrance of the story and the presence of God in the midst of the event.

Where was your experience of the Lord Jesus? Where and when did you experience a time when there was hardly even a thin layer of space between you and God?

I wonder wonder in their later years how the Apostles Peter, James and John told their stories of being on the mountaintop with with Jesus; when Jesus was completely changed into a figure who in front of their very eyes became dazzling white; Jesus who was accompanied by figures who looked a lot like the Old Testament greats Moses and Elijah? They were so jubilant that Peter burst out with that crazy statement about building three booths, one each for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

But then something even more dramatic happened that stopped the craziness. On the mountain from somewhere far away the apostles heard a voice from heaven that some had heard once before: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" This heavenly voice had been heard before at Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. The jubilation stopped as quickly as it had started, and no longer could Peter and the others jabber on without thinking. Silence, silence as they were warned to tell no one of their experience.

Do you think the apostles automatically left the spiritual high of their experience behind? No Way! However, sooner or later we all have to come down the mountain. Whether it is you, me, or the apostles, we all have to come down our mountain.

For Peter, James, and John it didn't take long before their bubble of a spiritual high was broken. Following the mountaintop experience, Jesus and the apostles walk down the mountain and encounter a large, and possibly unruly crowd. A man, a father cries out to Jesus: "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here."

The father, like Jesus' Father, had an only-son, an only child. The compassion of this father for his hurting only-child was everything in the world that mattered to him. I can only wonder if in that moment when the father of the child told Jesus about how he had asked Jesus' disciples to cast out the spirit and they had failed, that the apostles began

to mount their defense of denial. I can imagine hearing Peter and the other two tell the crowd, “Hey man, you know that wasn’t us. It was those other disciple dudes who failed the boy. Why, we hang out with Jesus, and we’ve got the good stuff to do this kind of work.” If they did, we’ll never know about it. What we do know is that Jesus went right to work and sent the evil spirit out of the boy. The power of the incarnate God was more powerful than any evil.

Most often the spiritual high points in our lives are followed by the hard realities of the life we live. Our experiences of the spirit-seized, shrieking, convulsing, foaming at the mouth, and rolling on the ground child come in many forms. People around us get sick, lose their jobs, get a bad grade, have a car break-down or have bills they can’t pay. When the inevitable comes, at times there is a whiplash like effect that we feel.

It is no accident that on the last Sunday after Epiphany and before the experience of Ash Wednesday, we contrast the glory of the Transfiguration with the Ash Wednesday words, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.” This is the beginning of the whiplash-like season of Lent when on the eve of Good Friday, Maundy Thursday, we will humble ourselves again and wash one another’s feet. This is the glorious being mingled with the gritty – at times literally.

As we hold to God, hold to His powerful hand in the midst of the personal whiplash of our reality, that’s when our commitment to being a Christ-follower becomes real. That is the moment when jubilation has the reality encounter with our daily lives. Time and time again in the scriptures we read about Jesus meeting people where they live out their daily lives.

Jesus met them when they were scorned, shamed and humiliated.

Jesus met them when they were in the midst of their greatest sinfulness.

Jesus met them when they’d lost everything; when they could no longer go on; when they felt that as in the old Temptations song “Sunshine, Blue Skies Please Go Away,” that darkness was their only friend; as in Otis Redding’s “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay,” when loneliness is your only friend. Do you know that feeling? I know you do.

The loving and consistent power of Jesus, the power that brought health back to a convulsing boy, the power that gave his father hope again, is the same loving power that sustains us. Even if we are in the midst of our loneliness or despair, the loving power of Jesus Christ is alive and real for us. The same power of God’s only Son when he went from the cross and grave to be resurrected to life anew is the same power that is at hand for you.

This is the loving power of Jesus that calls us back to our baptismal vows when we promised to:

Turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as our Savior.

Put our whole trust in his grace and love.

Follow and obey him as our Lord.²

² Book of Common Prayer (1979), New York: Church Publishing, 305.

To make these vows is to say that you and I will rely, that is to depend upon God's spirit. That is the same Spirit that will push us out into the messy world where we live and where we work with others. This is the messy world where people depend upon us to be for them their hope and their healing. This is the messy world in which the Spirit of God takes our meager skills and even enables us to love the un-lovable, help the un-help-able, to comfort and pray for the desperate, and to bring the love of our Lord Jesus to the most hardened among us.

Yes, it is ever so tempting to stay on that mountain of bliss where the thin-space exists between you and your Lord. Yet, if you are going to live out the life of grace that our Lord gives us, then not only will you come down that mountain, but all the way down you'll be asking, what now Lord? And in the words of the prophet Isaiah when he heard his Lord ask, whom shall I send, you'll be saying, "Here am I; send me!"³

AMEN.

³ Isaiah 6:8c, NSRV.