

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 29, 2006

The Rev. David A. Brounstein

Our gospel lesson from St. Matthew this morning opens with the transitional phrase, “When he was come down from the mountain.” The mountain referred to here is the one upon which Jesus gave one of his most extensive and well-known teachings, the Sermon on the Mount. His disciples were in attendance as was a large crowd gathered to hear him preach the good news of the Kingdom of God—the new relationship between God and man that Jesus has inaugurated.

The Scriptures frequently contrast glorious encounters with God that happen on a mountaintop with not so glorious events transpiring at the base of the mountain. We are presented with what appears to be differing perceptions of reality. Atop Mount Sinai, Moses appeared in the presence of God amidst the clouds, smoke, and fire. There, he received both the Law and Ten Commandments to guide and govern Israel. Faith comes easier on the mountaintop in such a supernaturally charged environment.

Atop a mountain with Jesus, Peter, James and John witnessed the Transfiguration. Jesus’ face shone as the sun. Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke concerning the coming Cross and Passion that Jesus would soon fulfill at Jerusalem. God spoke from heaven and testified concerning his Son. The experience filled the disciples with faith and awe.

There are occasions within the Christian life where we may have experienced a profound encounter with God. It may have occurred with a conversion of heart, at a retreat, or when receiving the sacrament of baptism, confirmation, or the Eucharist, to name a few. Mountaintop experiences are profoundly moving but remarkably fleeting in duration.

Moses came down the mountain expecting to find a faithful people: people who had seen the plagues inflicted upon the land of Egypt, people who had walked through the midst of the Red Sea on dry ground, people who had witnessed God drowning the armies of Pharaoh. Instead, he finds Aaron, his brother and High Priest, worshipping a golden calf and assisting in preparations to lead the children of Israel back to slavery in Egypt.

Jesus descended the mountain following his transfiguration expecting to find faithful disciples awaiting his return. These were men he had individually called by name; men that he had taught; men that he had commissioned to ministry. Instead, he finds disciples unable to exorcise a demon due to their unbelief.

In our own lives, instances of spiritual illumination are invariably followed with challenges to our own faith from family, friends, or events in the workplace. This is where our faith often encounters the crucible of distraction, derision, or despair.

This morning’s gospel is instructive because it breaks the typical scriptural pattern. Jesus comes down from the mountaintop after the Sermon on the Mount and is confronted with a testimonial of faith instead of unbelief. Surprisingly, it was not the faith of Israel to

whom Jesus was sent by God the Father, but rather, the faith of a Gentile, an outsider who represented the despised Roman occupation.

What was it about this centurion that caused Jesus to marvel and exclaim, “Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel” (Mat. 8:10)?

St. Luke (7:5) provides us with additional background information concerning this Roman centurion. We find that the centurion loved the nation of Israel and built a synagogue. Loving the nation may be a way of describing the centurion’s coming to faith in the God of Israel. In response to, and in thanksgiving for, that faith he then used his considerable discretion and power to build the synagogue to bless God and His people.

We know that centurions formed the military backbone of the Roman Empire. It was their job to exercise discipline, train recruits, and carry out orders from headquarters. They also went into battle with their men instead of directing military engagements from a safe distance. Centurions were not renowned for treating inhabitants of conquered territories with anything remotely approaching respect—contempt, yes, but respect, never.

The spiritual life often unfolds as a series of progressive revelations. To Israel, revelation was given through Moses, the Writings, and the Prophets. To the Gentiles, revelation took the form of an epiphany, a manifestation of God through signs and wonders for those who cared to truly see.

Centurions were practical, hands-on, no-nonsense type people. They were keenly aware of all that was going on in their local area. The signs and wonders associated with the ministry of Jesus in Capernaum did not go unnoticed and the centurion did not have to climb atop a mountain to observe it. Miracles and manifestations of God’s intervening love through Jesus Christ were readily visible in the region of the Galilee.

Finding Jesus coming down from the mountain, the centurion humbly addresses Jesus as “Lord.” He publicly acknowledges who Jesus is and exhibits complete faith that whatever word Jesus will speak, the same will be done. A man of authority bowed to the King of the Universe and received a reward he could never command.

The faith that Jesus marvels at is the faith lived at the bottom of the mountain, the place we spend most of our earthly existence. It is living a life that acknowledges by our words and deeds that Jesus is Lord. It is living a life without compromise to social and political pressures that are contrary to the Word of God. It is living a life exhibiting care and concern to friends and family who are sick, suffering, and dying. And finally, it is living a life in obedience to God—doing whatever Jesus commands us to do.

Each of us has been entrusted with responsibility and authority. We occupy one small part in the grand design of God’s plan of salvation for the world. We need to train and discipline ourselves to carry out our spiritual orders delivered from our heavenly headquarters through Jesus Christ our King. Let us learn the lesson of the faith-filled centurion and respond to our Lord with humility, with obedience, and with thanksgiving.

