

"TRANSFORMING MOMENT"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Peter Jenkins, author of Walk Across America and a number of other best-selling books, tells of the night he was converted to Christ. It took place down in Alabama at a hugh revival. He recalls,

"I didn't understand all that these people were saying about what had just happened between God and me. 'Born again'. 'Saved'. 'The Lord led you here tonight....' 'Praise the Lord...' 'Ain't God good!' 'He finally got you away from the Devil!'"

Those were the words that Peter Jenkins heard that night and later on in reflecting upon that experience, he said,

"It seemed as normal in their vocabulary as 'taxes' and 'commute' and 'weekend' were to my family and friends up here in New York and Connecticut."

The woman who had first spoken with him about his "conversion" found him again. He remembered that her name was Mary and he describes the scene.

"She stared at me with probing eyes...trying to figure out what I was feeling and thinking. I remembered what she had said about the angels singing because I'd become a Christian. And I wondered what kind of songs they sang."

"Peter" said Mary, "this great elation that you're feeling now...you are feeling great elation, aren't you?" she asked. "Yes" was Peter's answer. She continued to talk to him; her voice was soft...hard to hear. She told him,

"At this moment it may seem like these great feelings are going to last forever, but they won't. Being a Christian is not based on feelings. You're on a 'mountaintop' right now, but someday - sooner or later - you'll be far away from these great feelings. You may even wonder if all of this ever happened...."

Then Mary went on to say, "Your Christian walk is based on faith...not on feelings". Peter said he had never thought of that. Later, he thought...

"I was so thrilled that there could be good feelings mixed in with faith that I really didn't care about her opinions."

More than ten years have passed since that special night and Peter Jenkins goes on to say this,

"I was on a mountain top that night. The feelings lasted a long time, but that mountaintop hasn't lasted all these years. Maybe I've been on more mountaintops than some, but I've also climbed, sometimes crawled, out of some awfully steep valleys, too."

Let's spend some time this morning thinking about the mountaintops and the valleys we've experienced at times in our lives. Three points to build on.

A MOUNTAINTOP FAITH

First-off, sometimes our faith is a mountaintop faith. Let's go back to that Bible passage out of which this sermon grows.

Jesus took Peter and James and John, his brother, with Him and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And there for a short while they would be away from the crowds that were always pushing in against them. There on that high mountain they would have time for prayer and reflection. Now remember something happened to them while they were "up there". The appearance of Jesus "changed" or was "transfigured" before their very eyes. The Gospel writer put it this way,

"His face shone like the sun...and His clothes became dazzling white".

The spellbound disciples looked on in great disbelief as they saw Jesus engaged in conversation with Moses and Elijah. Who wouldn't be spellbound and in disbelief.

Peter was so impressed with what he saw that he wanted to remain on the mountaintop with Jesus and Moses and Elijah, as well as with his two fellow disciples. He turned to Jesus and said something like this,

"Lord...it's good for us to be here. And if you wish, I will make three dwellings here - one for You, one for Moses. And one for Elijah."

Peter liked it up there on the mountaintop, liked it so much that he wanted them all to stay up there. He would build some huts for them all. Caught up in the emotion of this rare moment, Peter wanted to prolong the experience as long as possible, so he proposed putting a roof over their heads. And who can blame him? This, after all, was a high point in his religious experience. And anyone who has ever been on a religious "high"...on a mountaintop can sympathize. Remember those good times at summer church camp as teenagers. We never wanted to come down from those "mountaintop" days. Something was "happening" there.

I liked what Kathleen Barrett wrote in a recent issue of The Upper Room. Some of you read it faithfully, so perhaps you'll remember it. She said,

"I used to be angry most of the time. Store clerks were often rude to me, but I attributed it to the notion that they weren't getting paid enough."

But after Kathleen accepted Christ into her life, it seemed that the whole world changed. She goes on to write,

"Store clerks became nicer and the sun shone brighter, and the birds chirped more cheerily and the flowers bloomed more beautifully. Of course, I thought the whole world had changed. I didn't realize until a few years later that it was I who had been changing. I was different. I had softened. It wasn't the store clerks who had become friendlier. I had."

Kathleen went on to reflect,

"The sun didn't shine any brighter. I was just more aware of it. The birds had chirped when I had been in a grumpy mood, but more likely, they had only annoyed me. And, of course, the flowers had always blossomed, but I hadn't noticed their sweet fragrance and appreciated a peach-colored rose opening its delicate petals to the sun.

I changed when Jesus came into my life. And He continues to change me and to delight me today" she witnesses.

Ahhh, that each of us could have that kind of mountaintop faith. Sometimes we do. And it helps to set the tone of our day and how we deal with others and the problems of the day. How sad it is to see a Christian who has lost the "joy" of his or her salvation. How is it with you.

SOMETIMES WE MEET GOD IN THE VALLEY

But it was never meant for us to always stay on the mountaintop. So let's move on. Sometimes we meet God down in the valley. That's one of the wonderful things about our faith. I'm sure you know of what I speak.

Frederick Buechner recalls one "low" moment in his life when God broke through to him in a rather unusual way.

"I remember sitting parked by the roadside once...terribly depressed and afraid about my daughter's illness and what was going on in our family...."

As he was sitting there thinking about his daughter's illness, he noticed a car that seemed to come from nowhere. The car carried a message from God. The word he most needed to see at that low moment of his life was found right there on the license plate of that car. The license plate, he said....

"bore on it the one word out of all the words in the dictionary that I needed most to see exactly then...the word was TRUST!" T R U S T

Sitting there in his car along side the highway, God's message was revealed to him on the license plate of the passing automobile. It is difficult to describe such an experience, but he wrote...

"Was the experience something to laugh off as the kind of joke life plays on us every once in a while? Or, was it the word of God? I am willing to believe that maybe it was something or both, but for me it was an EPIPHANY."

There's more to this. It turned out that the car owner was a trust officer of a local bank and after reading of the incident somewhere, the trust officer paid a personal visit to the study of Frederick Buechner one afternoon. He presented Buechner with the license plate which bore the word which he so desperately needed to see that day - TRUST. He placed that license plate on a bookshelf where it serves to this day to remind him of his trust in God. Who was it who said that "Coincidence is God's way of keeping His anonymity". He said this about the plate,

"It's a bit rusty around the edges and a little battered, and it is also as holy a relic as I have ever seen".

Now anyone who has ever met God in the valley knows how precious the experience is. The important point is that we should not feel guilty if we are going through a period of life when there are more valleys than mountaintops.

There are some believers who have the mistaken notion that a perpetual smile is a sign of authentic faith. Not so. Not so. The joy of the Christian is an inner assurance that wears well both on the mountaintop and in the valley. As that lady, Mary, said to Peter Jenkins following his mountaintop moment that revival in Alabama, the "Christian walk is a faith - not a feeling". It is an eternal verity, not simply a glib testimony. And the God of the mountaintop is also the God of the valley. "God doesn't seem as close to me as he use to" said the woman to her pastor. To which her pastor replied, "I wonder who's moved".

THE CHANGE THAT TAKES PLACE

A third point to consider. It has to do with the quality of the change that takes place in our lives...whether it's on the mountaintop or down in the valley...this moment of divine encounter. This change that can take place...

While Peter is speaking to Jesus about staying up there on the mountain, a bright cloud overshadows them. Suddenly, they hear a voice speaking from the cloud saying,

"This is My Beloved Son, with Him I am well-pleased. Listen to Him..."

There on the mountaintop, Peter and the other two disciples hear the voice of God in clear and uncertain terms confirming that Jesus is indeed, "The Son of the living God". And that voice challenges them to "listen to Him". This would turn out to be a transforming moment for Peter. Years later, when he is one of the great Apostles, he will still go back to that moment and retell his experience on that high mountain with Jesus. In the little Book of Second Peter, we find these words:

"We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with Him on the Holy Mountain" (II Peter 1: 18)

Much more would happen to Jesus and the disciples. I would like to believe that as a result of this encounter that Peter and the other disciples would be forever changed. This was the decisive and transforming moment in their lives. When we meet Jesus and accept the challenge to become modern day disciples, our lives are changed, transformed...if we dare to risk the change..

In her book, Dare to Dream, Florence Littauer tells of a valley that once faced former MOTOWN record producer and song writer, Frank Wilson. At the crest of his career, Wilson faced something over which he had no control. In 1974, having sold over thirty-five million records, he found himself involved in a nasty custody struggle over his young son, Franko. He claims that he had tried everything on the boy's mother....

"Psychology...money...my influence with her friends, and nothing worked..."

Desperate for any kind of a solution after a confrontation with the Los Angeles police and the prospect of a lengthy court battle, Frank Wilson gave up control of his life. I guess you could say that the Lord showed him how to handle the situation. He recalls,

"Having looked at my life, then, at that point in time, I realized I had been deceiving myself and there was little I was actually controlling. He (The Lord) offered to take care of the situation for me...

It was the most difficult thing I've ever done - to leave the situation in the hands of God - but He came in and by His power resolved it. I thought if God can do what I had tried to do for five years without success, then what would the rest of my life be like if I had the guts to turn it over to Him?"

Frank Wilson did "turn it over to Him". He took a year off from MOTOWN and proceeded to "ground" himself in his new faith and returned to share his repaired dream with others in the record business, including Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and Marilyn McCoo who all gave their hearts to the Lord because of his witness.

I'm sure it started with a feeling, but it eventually grew into something far more powerful than a feeling. It became a tough, sturdy, rocklike faith in the living God.

CLOSING

Back to the Biblical setting with which we started this sermon. I'm sure that seeing Jesus with Moses and Elijah was the experience of a lifetime for those three disciples - Peter, James and John. A transforming moment for each one of them. When they heard the voice of God speaking to them from the cloud, they fell to the ground and we read that they were "overcome by fear". But Jesus spoke a comforting word. He touched them saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

And then as they made their way down the mountain back to the valley, Jesus tells them to remain silent about what they had just experienced. The time will come for them to tell all the world what they had experienced and about the identity of Jesus. That time came at Pentecost and remember it was Peter who took the lead. He would end up telling the world of his day all about Jesus.....a message that continues even down to this day!

And this is what happens when you meet God - whether it's a mountain-top experience or whether you meet Him down in the valley in the moment of need. What matters ultimately is the change that takes place in your life, as a result of that transforming moment. It starts with a feeling and grows into a faith. And so may it be with you, and you...and you!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your presence and nearness in these moments. We feel You near. Help us to take that "leap of faith" and to be willing to let go and to let You have a chance with our lives. All in the name and spirit of Christ we pray. Amen.