

Out of this world?

Matthew 17:1-9

March 6, 2011

Can you remember one singular experience that changed your life, a single special moment, shared with one other person or just a few other people, that changed you forever?

When I was ten or eleven or twelve, I traveled with my family from East Lansing, Michigan, where we were living at that time, to Pasadena, California, to visit my grandparents, my mother's parents. While we were there, my father and I climbed Mount Wilson, one of the peaks in the San Gabriel Mountains and the site of an important astronomical observatory.

I made other hikes with my father, before then and certainly after, but that is the hike I remember. It was an ambitious climb, a seven mile hike one way with an elevation gain of close to 5000 feet. That's quite an accomplishment for an eleven-year-old! I was most proud of making it to the top.

But I have remembered that day, all my life, because it was an accomplishment I shared with my father. And it wasn't just the accomplishment. It wasn't just about making it to the top. This was an experience, a journey, an adventure, we shared, just the two of us. Just the two of us. This was ours!

We shared with each other what no one else knew or could know -- what that day felt like, what that day felt like to us. We watched the climbing sun and the dark smog filling the valley beneath us. We shared the determined struggle to keep on putting one foot in front of the other, even as thigh muscles and lungs and dried mouths burned. We shared the exhilaration of turning the last switchback and knowing we had reached the top.

That day changed me, not in ways I can easily describe, but I know it did because I have always remembered that day. That day surely birthed my lifelong love of hiking, of climbing to the tops of high mountains. And that day surely confirmed my love for my father, a love that I could claim, not merely as one of his three children, but as me, as Tim, a love shared uniquely between just him and me.

Can you remember an experience like that? A singular experience you shared with a parent or a spouse or a good friend? A special moment that has stayed with you, a special moment that has changed you, forever?

It must have been like that for James and Peter and John. Jesus took them on a hike, up a high mountain. It was just them, nobody else, just the three of them and Jesus. They saw what nobody else saw. They heard what nobody else heard. They shared a special moment with Jesus that surely changed them forever.

They shared a vision, an extraordinary vision, a vision of something that must have seemed to them out of this world. They watched as Jesus' appearance changed before their eyes. His face shone with a bright light like the sun and his clothes shone with a dazzling white light. Two other figures came and joined him and talked with him. They recognized them -- somehow! -- as Moses and Elijah.

And then a cloud, a shining cloud, overshadowed the mountaintop and all of them, and a voice spoke from the cloud: "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased -- listen to him!" They fell terrified onto the ground, and when Jesus came to them and raised them up, it was all gone. It was just them and Jesus, almost as if nothing had happened. Whoa!

But something had happened! Something only they had seen. A special moment only they had shared with Jesus.

It was an extraordinary moment, but it was made most meaningful because it was him, because they had shared it with him, because he was still there with them, but now somehow, in some way, different to them, more to them. He was forever changed to them, forever changed with them.

So what did James and Peter and John see? What did these three men witness there on the mountaintop?

Did they catch a glimpse of Jesus' true identity? For a moment, just a moment, was the veil drawn aside, the disguise removed? Did they see that though Jesus seemed like one of them, he was really not like them at all, but instead something like an angel, something like a god, something out of this world?

But then, so quickly, they all came back to earth. They went back down the mountain, where Jesus was confronted with an boy plagued by epileptic seizures, with the stubborn and unbelieving crowd, with disciples who, despite all they had seen and heard, lacked the faith even the size of a mustard seed!

Here, back on the ground, Jesus is once more immersed in a sea of suffering and disease and misunderstanding and anger and frustration and unbelief.

Here, back on the ground, Jesus must tell his disciples, again, that he will soon die, that he will soon be handed over to those who will kill him.

Here, back on the ground, Jesus seems very much like one of us, subject to the same inexorable realities of pain and loss and death.

So what happened on the mountain and what did it mean?

Did it mean that Jesus doesn't really belong here, among us? That Jesus is not really one of us, but some kind of messenger from another world, a messenger that will soon leave us, soon leave us to be once more on our own?

I can't believe that! I can't believe that! Jesus belongs here! Jesus is one of us ... really!

That's why I am a Christian. That's why I stay a Christian, because Jesus is someone like me, someone who shares life with me, with all of us, someone who brings God to this life, to my life, someone who brings God into this world. Jesus is not something out of this world, but someone very much in this world, with this world, for this world.

We say in our Statement of Faith: "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot." Shared our common lot! Not pretended to be like us, not walked among us for a little while, but shared our common lot! Jesus wears no disguise!

Then what happened on the mountain? What did they see?

They saw a cloud, a shining cloud, a glory cloud, that covered the mountain. They saw Moses and Elijah, and they saw Jesus' face shine like the sun.

The echoes of the experience of the Hebrew people at Mount Sinai are palpable! When Moses came down from the mountain, when he came out from the glory cloud that covered Sinai, his face shone, too! His face shone with light reflected from the glory of God somehow manifested in the cloud.

So Jesus is like Moses, a new Moses, a savior to his people. Like Moses, Jesus bears the tangible mark of intimacy with God, the telltale sign of a man who has been in God's own presence. But, at the same time, Jesus is more than Moses, because God's voice never said of Moses: "This is my own dear Son!"

On the mountain, James and Peter and John heard who Jesus is and they saw. They saw the face that reflects God's glory. They saw the face that reflects God. They saw the face of God's own dear Son.

But it was a human face they saw, a human face like Moses' face, shining with the glory of God. Jesus belongs with us. Jesus is one of us, and his face was shining with the glory of God!

Do you understand what I am trying to say? Do you see? The meaning of that special moment on the mountaintop is not that Jesus is revealed as someone from out of this world, but that the Jesus who shares our common lot, who is one of us, who is very much in this world, is revealed as the bearer of God's glory. Jesus brings the glory of God into this world! Jesus brings the glory of God to us!

Can you imagine how this special moment shared with Jesus must have changed these three men? Maybe not just then, maybe not all at once, but surely it changed them. Because they remembered that day, that singular experience, and they told it (not right away, because Jesus told them not to) but told it one day, after he was raised, to the rest of his followers.

The one who walked with them, who shared meals with them, who worked and prayed and laughed and cried with them, who suffered like them, who suffered with them, who suffered for them, the one who was one of them, shone with the glory of God! God's glory, God's light, God's goodness, God's mercy, God's empowering and healing and life-giving love is not out of reach, not inaccessible, not out there, not out of this world. It is here! Among us! With us! And now in us!

Maybe you've seen it, too ...

Have you seen that light, the light like the sun, that light that has its source in God and God alone? Have you seen that light shining in the face of ... another servant of God? Another one of God's own dear children? Another one blessed with the tangible mark of intimacy with God?

I have ...