

Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9: 28-36 (37-43)

SHINING WITH THE LIGHT OF HEAVEN

Can you picture it? Jesus asks Peter, James, and John to go with him when he goes up on the mountain to pray, so they start hiking.

They begin at the base of the mountain, in the wilderness of Israel, where the climate is a desert---not too much water, scrubby plants, dusty paths. The smells are the plants and maybe animals.

The sounds are of the people around them---the other disciples, the crowds, maybe a donkey braying and a soldier shouting. It's warm, maybe hot.

They start up the mountain, with Jesus leading the way. As much walking as they do, they don't often go up mountains, so maybe their legs start to hurt. Maybe they get thirsty. Maybe they complain about "Where are we going now??"

The noises of people and of civilization fade away in the distance. There is more birdsong and the music of a little stream coming down the mountainside. They can hear their sandals hitting the ground and the beating of their hearts as they exert themselves to climb.

They climb and climb, up and up.

The plants get taller and closer together. There are some real trees. The plants are different, with different scents. There is more shade on the path and the air becomes cooler as they climb higher.

Imagine the disciples trying to keep up with Jesus as he hurries to the top of the mountain. He is in a hurry to talk to his father, anxious to be in prayer. The disciples don't want to get lost on the way, and they don't want to miss a moment of this experience.

It's not every day that they get to go up the mountain with Jesus, so this is a treasured experience.

Up and up, the path twists and turns, now narrow, now wider. And just when they think they won't make it, that they just can't hike any more, there they are, at the top of the mountain.

And Jesus begins to pray.

Something unbelievable happens. As they watch, Jesus' face changes. It becomes brighter. It shines with the light of heaven! His clothes become bright white, brighter and whiter than any bleach could get them, also shining with that heavenly light.

And suddenly there are two men with him! Where did they come from? They just appeared, and Peter, James, and John recognize them as Moses and Elijah.

It was a supernatural experience. People's faces don't shine and clothes don't just become whiter as we watch. People don't appear out of thin air. This mountaintop experience was a holy time. God was close, closer than the disciples had ever felt before!

This was not the first time someone's face had shone because they spent time in the presence of God.

This morning, in our passage from Exodus, we heard that Moses' face shined so brightly after spending time with God on Mt. Sinai that he had to wear a veil when he was with the people. He would take the veil off to go in to the Tabernacle to speak with God, and he would cover his face again every time he came back outside so that the people would not be frightened.

Have you ever felt that you were so close to God that you felt like your face must be shining? A mountaintop experience when the presence of God was so obvious, so undeniable that you felt like your face really must have been glowing?

Maybe it was at Christmas Conference or at summer camp or on a truly incredible day? Maybe you were in a very beautiful place, or maybe you were with some inspirational people, or maybe you were deep in prayer.

I have had that mountaintop feeling a number of times in my life, but none more clear than a couple of weeks ago as I sat at Pete Aqui's bedside. As I sat listening to him breathe, preparing to go home to heaven, I felt that God was right there.

It seemed to me that heaven was just outside the window and if I turned my head quickly enough I would see Jesus there, waiting to carry Pete home in his arms. It seemed like God must certainly be walking in the garden outside, looking for Pete and calling for him. Calling from the garden where Pete loved to work. Maybe I could hear if I just listened harder.

I left Pete's house feeling like my face must be glowing, but it wasn't my face! It was my heart, my soul, that was shining with the light of heaven!

In the midst of death, God was there.

In the labored breathing, God breathed the Holy Spirit into the room.

Whatever fear was there, whatever sorrow was there, whatever pain was there, or uncertainty or doubt, God was there.

The Celtic people call this a thin place----a place where the boundary between earth and heaven becomes very thin, almost transparent. A thin place, where our human selves come as close to God as we will be in this world.

A thin place----- a holy place, an extraordinarily blessed time, an unforgettable experience which doesn't last for long. You can't hang on to it. You can't live all the time in that thin place, even if you want to.

Peter wanted to. He wanted to build booths---shelters----for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Places for them to stay a while. I don't think Peter wanted to go back down the mountain. Back down where Jesus would be killed, as he had already told them would happen.

Back down where people clamored to be healed. An endless line of people needing miracles. Back down where life was ordinary and not supernatural, where God sometimes seemed far away even though Peter was with Jesus, the Son of the Living God.

Peter undoubtedly learned at some later point how to pray the way Jesus did. A way that would bring God very near, near enough to light up his face, his heart, his soul with the light of heaven.

Because even though we can't hang on to those mountaintop experiences for very long, we can find them more often if we pray for them.

The power of prayer is very real. It can lead to healing, to change, to comfort and strength. We often pray for miracles, but how often do we pray to find that thin place, to find Emmanuel, God-with-us? A miracle also, but of a more interior kind.

When I talk about spiritual growth for transformation, this is what I'm talking about. Because even after that shiny- face feeling has faded, the light of heaven shines on in the heart and soul. There is a long-lasting effect that I believe is what the apostle Paul meant by "praying constantly."

Maybe you already know all about this way of praying. Or maybe you are happy with your relationship with God the way it is. But if you would like to know more, keep on listening.

I can't teach this completely in the next few minutes, but this is what I will be teaching on the first and third Saturdays of each month at 7:00 in the parsonage. I will be more than happy to teach it other times as well, because I need to limit the size of the group. Just let me know when and where.

So here we go----Presence Prayer 101. Take a deep breath.

There---that's the first step. Now take another deep breath. Focus on your breathing and keep breathing----in out. In out. You can close your eyes if it will help you focus.

Now keep breathing. And with each breath in say to yourself "Lord Jesus Christ" and as you breathe out think "have mercy on me."

Let's do that together a few times.

Lord Jesus Christ... have mercy on me.

You can use other phrases. (Keep breathing!)

Sometimes as I inhale I say "More Jesus" and then "less me" as I exhale.

Most of the time I breathe out Fear and breathe in Love.

This is the ancient breath prayer used for centuries to center thoughts on Jesus. It relaxes you, makes it possible to focus. Other thoughts may creep in. Just return to your breathing and your phrases until you feel ready to move on to the next step.

The next step can vary. There are a number of ways to continue in prayer.

One way is to read a Bible passage---a story or a few verses that belong together. Read it through the first time and just take in the words. Notice what's happening, who's involved, just the basic facts of the passage. Think about it for a few moments. Keep breathing! Let's try that now---

Luke 15: (Prodigal Son)

Who are the characters? If you had been there, what would you have seen? What would you have heard? What would you have smelled?

Now, I'm going to read it again. This time I want you to notice if there are particular words or a phrase that jumps out at you, a part of the story that is especially meaningful to you----

Hold that phrase in mind and breathe it in and out a few times.

Now I'm going to read it one more time! Keep breathing. This time I want you to listen for what you should do or what you should accept as absolute truth from this story. There is something in it that can make a difference in your life. What is it?

When I am finished I want you to sit in silence for a few minutes and listen for God's voice. Let God answer the prayer that is in this passage for you.

(read it again.)

What did God say to you? If you want to write it down, take a pencil from the pew rack and write on the bulletin or on whatever paper you can find.

This is the first step in transformational prayer, what I call Presence Prayer. This one step alone can change not only how you read the Bible, but your life!

I invite you to pray this way often. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Make this your sacrifice, your commitment for Lent this year that you will try this way of praying.

Choose stories from the life of Christ and as we get closer to Easter, move to the stories that detail his last days on Earth. I think this will make Lent very meaningful for you.

Yes, this takes time and we are all busy people. Find a time that works for you---first thing in the morning, or right after lunch, or maybe right before you go to sleep. If you start your day this way your day will feel a lot more calm. At lunchtime it can help get your day back on track if you have been struggling.

If you pray this way at bedtime you just might have the most amazing dreams in which you hear God's voice!

Try this every day if you can, but I am asking you to commit to at least three times a week. I think you will find that you will want to pray this way more and more often once you are comfortable with it.

I will be talking more about different ways to pray during Lent, so if you don't quite get this way, if it's not for you or you still have questions, hang in there! Send me an e-mail or call me if you have questions or want to share what an incredible mountaintop experience you have with this!

And I want to tell you something----this prayer method is exactly how I begin to prepare my sermons. Whatever I hear in prayer early in the week is what you hear on Sunday. What I hear from the word of God as I pray, what God teaches me in the scripture during my prayer time---that is what I preach!

But this prayer isn't just for preachers. It is for anyone who wants to figure out how the Bible is relevant to their lives. It is for anyone who wants to live a life obedient to the word.

It is for anyone who wants a deeper, closer walk with God, walking in the light of heaven.

It is for people just like you!

Amen!

