

Last Sunday after Epiphany  
February 3, 2008  
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When was the last time you had an experience that stopped you dead in your tracks and you thought "Awesome!" One of those times when the hair on your arm stands on end, when you feel as if your breath has been taken away and you are overwhelmed. Maybe it was a beautiful sunset. Perhaps it was the moon coming up over snow crested mountains. It could be your first kiss or the experience of a baby being born.

Have you ever been quiet, so quiet, you could hear the person next to you breathing? Have you stopped to watch the snow fall in the woods and listened to the silence? How about sitting on a beach and just watching as the waves roll in?

Whatever and wherever that experience might have happened, can you recall a time when nothing mattered but being present in the moment. You are aware of the power of the moment and you want to experience it as fully as possible. In those moments we become quiet, we breathe a little slower and we see things in a different way. All we can think is "wow" and we want to hold on to that moment. We want the experience to last forever.

These "mountaintop experiences" are holy moments. They are times when our senses seem to be in overdrive. We feel the rush of adrenaline and the ecstasy of joy. We feel that if we can be still enough we can feel the very presence of God's love poured out upon us.

As the gospel writer Matthew tells the story, Jesus and his disciples have traveled throughout Galilee teaching, preaching, and healing the sick. Interest in Jesus continues to grow as he attracts larger and larger crowds.

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" is followed by Jesus' prediction that he must suffer and die. That was unacceptable to Peter which results in Jesus' strong rebuke of Peter and further teaching that discipleship has a cost.

Then, six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John with him to the mountaintop. Many Biblical scholars have weighed in on the question of whether this was a physical mountain or a sacred place, a place where they

could be open to the presence of God. On that mountaintop Jesus is transfigured before his disciples, "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet appeared with him.

Immediately Peter wants to create three dwellings to mark the spot. Peter is awestruck by what he has witnessed and wants to find a means to hold on to the moment. Peter knows he is in the presence of God. As Peter is outlining his plan to hold on to the moment, a bright cloud overshadows them and a voice in the cloud proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then the voice adds, "Listen to him."

At this point the disciples are so overwhelmed that they fall on their faces in fear and awe. Just as quickly as the cloud came, the vision is gone and the disciples are alone with Jesus. Jesus brings them back to reality by touching them and saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Some people report moments like this experience of the disciples. The majority of us have not experienced this kind of overwhelmingly powerful experience of God. Some of us have had profoundly moving experiences.

For some of us those experiences have been in the church. We have had those moments when the prayers spoken and the hymns sung speak to us in a powerful way of the presence of God. Perhaps it was kneeling at the altar rail when suddenly we feel the presence of the community of faith and we hear, maybe for the first time, the words that Christ gave himself for our sake. At that moment, a holy meal of participation becomes far greater than the sharing of bread and wine.

Whether these moments happen in a church, on the beach or in a theatre, we find ourselves stopping. We are very still as we soak in the moment. We cannot help but utter, "wow" knowing we are in the presence of God. Like the disciples with Jesus on the mountaintop we want to find a way to make the moment last forever.

I know there are many of you sitting thinking I never had an experience like that, so what is wrong with me? Perhaps it is that the mountain, wherever that might be, just seems too high for you to climb. Perhaps for some of us it is a lack of confidence. We feel we are not that kind of religious person. We feel we don't know enough about God or about faith to have that kind of awe

inspiring moment. So, we become our own worst enemies. We start to second guessing ourselves wondering who would want to be around us, talk to us, love us. We think we really do not deserve a "wow" moment.

For others of us the noise and frantic pace of our lives keeps us from encountering a moment of silence where God can creep in. We rush from task to task, from one noisy place to another. Have you noticed that there are no places you can enter where there is quiet? Most of our buildings have music playing all the time. Places of business have the constant noise of activity. Even in our car with the radio turned off and the windows rolled up we have the noise of the bustling world around us. Being quiet and still makes us uncomfortable and anxious. Sometimes I think there is no way for God to get through to us. We are so in control of our lives and fill our lives with such activity that the Holy Spirit does not have an opening to get in and surprise us.

So, this being the last Sunday of Epiphany and the Sunday before we begin the season of Lent, I am wondering if you might be willing to do some mountain climbing with me? Lent is a season of preparation for the Easter feast. It is a time when the church invites us to pay attention to our lives. We are invited to adopt some disciplines intended to help us become more aware of God.

I know some of you decide to give up chocolate or beer for Lent. I have never been sure how denying myself something I really did not need brought me closer to God. But, if that works for you, do it.

Some of you take on disciplines for Lent, like making New Year's resolutions. We resolve to read a spiritual book, or the Bible, or exercise every day in Lent and not just once a week. If that works for you, do it.

This year during the season of Lent, I am inviting you to join me in the "5-6 Prayer club." Club members will stop for 5 minutes every day during the six weeks of Lent. We are going to be still and pray for our parish. I am going to give you some tools to use to climb this mountain. I have created a "5-6" prayer guide that the ushers will have to give you as you leave this morning. The guide will help us focus our prayers for the week.

I am sure that you cannot force mountaintop experiences. I know for a fact that the Spirit moves like the wind, we don't know where it comes from and

we don't know where it goes. But, if we as a parish were to stop for just 5 minutes every day to reflect on the blessings we share as a faith community and offer to God the challenges we face, I believe we can climb a mountain together. In climbing that mountain we will find ourselves open to the experience of God's presence, an experience that takes our breath away.

Join me by signing the pledge form in your bulletin. Place it in the alms basin when the ushers come around.

May all of God's people this Lent be stopped in their tracks and utter a collective "Awesome!"