



THE MOUNTAIN TOP

Mark 9:2-9



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When you hear stories like this one of the disciples' vision of Jesus on the mountain top, do you feel deprived?

I don't know about you, but I have no trouble believing Bible stories about supernatural experiences: like Moses and the burning bush, or the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, or the story in today's Gospel Lesson, where Peter, James and John see Jesus transfigured before them, appearing dazzling white, like sunlight reflecting off the windshield of the car in front of you, or one of those beautiful Swarovski crystals.

I personally have never had one of those supernatural experiences, but I've heard stories -- stories from people who are otherwise completely rational; people who have no reason whatsoever to make this stuff up. I believe them also because our God -- creator of the universe -- has can do anything and create anything. I believe what the Scripture says repeatedly, "With God, nothing is impossible."

I just read a story this past week from a pastor in New York state. He says: "We had moved into a new apartment and felt very uncomfortable with the sleeping arrangements. There was a very small bedroom at the top of the stairs that my wife and I could not fit into, so we gave it to our little girl at the time. I feared so much for her safety that I didn't sleep well at night. I knew that if a fire ever broke out, we might not be able to get to her room to save her. One night, two months later, I heard sounds like someone walking up the stairs. I rolled over and looked down the hallway, and at the end of it, standing by my daughter's door, was my uncle who had died some years before. As I continued to look in utter amazement, all he said was: she is well protected, do not fear for her safety. I looked again, and he was gone. A feeling of peace and tranquility washed over me. I had no more problems or concerns about her safety."

Other folks have told me similar stories -- for example, maybe a dream where God told them something important, or made a promise that was later fulfilled.

I suppose these might be called "mountaintop experiences", although they may not have been "peak experiences", in the sense of the ecstasy or overwhelming emotion experienced by early mystics.

I can't say that I've ever had such an experience, but I don't feel deprived. Through my studies and research and learning and teaching, and all my life experiences over the years, God

has given me an absolute certainty that God became flesh and dwelt among us, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Son of God and is now the exalted Son of God, equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It's amazing to me, really, because I can't tell you exactly where this certainty comes from. It's a product of many years and experiences, but mostly it's just a gift, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

So I don't feel deprived at all that I don't speak in tongues, or see visions, or that I've never been cured of a disease by a faith-healer.

When you read about Peter, James and John seeing this amazing transfiguration of Jesus on the mountaintop, you might think, "Oh, I wish I'd been there! What a blessing – what a privilege it would've been to be there and to see it." No doubt it would! But it doesn't mean that you've been deprived. After all, haven't we been blessed in so many other ways? Hasn't God lavished gift after gift upon us, less spectacular, certainly, but no less valuable? I know I can't count the number of times that I've said to myself, "Wow! My cup does, indeed, runneth over!"

No, we have not been deprived, just because we haven't seen the amazing things the disciples saw. Remember what Jesus said to Thomas, who wouldn't believe until Jesus was in the same room with him, and he'd seen the evidence that Jesus had risen? Jesus said, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe."

So we are blessed! We've not been deprived at all. When you think about it, only Peter, James and John saw the Transfiguration. Were the other disciples deprived? None of the disciples of Jesus had electricity or central heating or running water, as we do. Were they deprived? Elijah was so great and holy that only he and Enoch and Jesus were taken up bodily into heaven— only three out of all the great people in the Bible! Were the others deprived? Of course not.

Elisha, according to today's Old Testament Scripture, bitterly resisted Elijah's leaving. He was dreading being left alone, without his mentor, without his friend, without his spiritual father. But after Elijah left, was Elisha deprived?

So, I hope YOU don't feel deprived when someone tells you they had an out-of- body experience, or were so overcome by the Holy Spirit that they spoke in tongues. Remember that Paul said that the Holy Spirit gives different gifts in different ways to different people. God gives to each of us according to our need, and according to God's plans for us.

Even if you become terminally ill, you can pray and God will give you the gifts and the strength you need to travel through that final stage of life, which all of us will have to go through. We won't be deprived.

You know, there seem to be some people who even go so far as to resent those who are different from them, as if that differentness were a criticism of themselves. It seems as if their feeling of deprivation comes from low self-esteem, and like tracking radar, they seem to cling onto any evidence that they are inferior, as if they're looking for proof that they're inadequate.

Well, such so-called "proof" is easy to find, because there are always others who will seem to be more blessed, and other people will experience situations that will seem more pleasant than the one we're in, other fields beyond our fence where the grass will seem to be much greener.

But we are not deprived. No matter who we are, or what's happening to us, we can sing with the psalmist, "Yahweh is my shepherd; I shall not lack." Or as Elton John sings: "You'll be blessed." God says, "Trust me. You'll be blessed."

I've known Christians who normally worshiped in a small church like ours, taking the opportunity to go a Promise Keepers rally, or to a lively worship service in one of those huge southern style gospel churches, and when they got back, they made disparaging remarks comparing the humble liturgy of their own congregation to the enormous energy and emotion of thousands of people in a football stadium, or to the glitzy church with a gifted, 100-voice gospel choir

But they were in no way deprived! Even if you and I had no other "wonderful experience" to point to -- only the testimony to Jesus in the New Testament; only the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist -- we would STILL have all we need! We would STILL be abundantly blessed, and not deprived at all.

Remember Martin Luther King, in his famous speech saying: "I've been to the mountaintop." What he meant was: Like Moses, who was allowed to go up Mount Nebo and look across the Jordan and survey the Promised Land before he died, so also Martin Luther King had been given the privilege, and the hope and the perception, to look into the future and see the Promised Land for his people— a time when they would be able to say, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God above I'm free at last."

King was blessed with a vision, a faith in God's future. If we too have such faith, are we not abundantly blessed?

Even if we had nothing but our faith and trust in God, we would be rich beyond measure. As St. Paul said in Romans 8: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

So we are blessed, and need never feel deprived.

Finally, I came across a story a few years ago about a shipwreck: The lone survivor washed up on a small, uninhabited island. He cried out to God to save him; and every day he scanned the horizon for help, but none came. Exhausted, he eventually managed to build a rough hut and set up a place where he could at least sleep and try to survive. But one day, after wandering off to hunt for food, he came back to find his little hut in flames, the smoke rolling up into the sky. The worst had happened, and he grieved and despaired. Early the next day, however, a ship drew near the island and rescued him. "How did you know I was here?" he asked the crew. "We saw your smoke signal," they replied.

It goes to show you that our present difficulty may be instrumental to our future happiness! You may be going through a period in your life when you feel deprived. You may not see how it could possibly be a means of blessing. But look what happened to the crucified Jesus! He rose again, and all his suffering was abundantly rewarded. He was not deprived.

So also with us: God promises that all things work together for good for those who love him. So we are never deprived. Amen.