

Date: February 7, 2016  
Scriptures: Exodus 34:29-35; Luke 9:28-36  
Title: Up to the Mountain

Today is transfiguration Sunday.

The Sunday we acknowledge God passionately desires to transfigure our lives.

Two men went up on a mountain.  
The first one lived about nine hundred years  
before the second.  
Yet, their experiences were very similar.  
The first, Moses, conversed with God face to face.  
There, on the mountain, God taught him.  
Taught him how to begin to fashion  
a motley crew into a faithful people.  
God also gave Moses two tablets,  
known as the Ten Commandments.  
Moses face shown like the sun  
when he descended from the mountain  
to the plain below.

The second man, Jesus,  
also conversed with God  
on a mountain.  
Unlike Moses, he was not alone.  
His faithful disciples,  
Peter, James, and John,  
accompanied him.  
God, too, was not alone.  
Moses and Elijah, two of Israel's greatest prophets,  
were there also.  
This meeting occurred before Jesus turned his face  
toward Jerusalem and the cross.  
It prepared Jesus for what lay ahead,  
the disciples also.  
It was also a foretaste of glory divine,  
a foretaste of the eternal captured in time.  
Like Moses,  
Jesus' face shown like the sun  
as he talked with God.

Mountain top experiences. . . .

Have you had one?

Perhaps several?

They are difficult to describe,  
aren't they?

Is it even possible to describe the eternal  
using the language of time and space?

We can

say time seems to stand still;

say such experiences are exhilarating;

say they are grace filled;

say they change us.

But, it is difficult to say more than that.

Two mountain top stories ~

one in the Hebrew Testament;

one in the Christian Testament.

Each are pivotal stories in the testament they grace.

Their presence and their importance  
push us to ask ourselves

why they appear in scripture.

Why are they there?

What do they want to teach us?

What do they have for us to learn?

Mountain tops symbolize

peak experiences,

a broadened perspective,

increased understanding,

and most certainly,

God's transformative possibility.

These two stories would have us understand

**that relationship with God is the peak of perfection  
of human life.**

It is to be desired above all else;

sought above all else;

cherished all else.

Why?

Because relationship with God makes it possible

for us to live a fully human life.

A life open to the sacredness of all creation,  
a life of loving kindness and care for all things great and small,  
a life of compassion toward all people,  
a life of hope and possibility,  
a life of courage in the face of challenge,  
a life trusting all is well and will be well.

These stories want us to go up to the mountain top  
so we can live graced lives  
when we go down from the mountain top.

Rev. Heidi Neumark grew up Lutheran.  
Her family attended church weekly.  
They also participated fully in the life of the church.  
She graduated high school,  
went to college  
and then to seminary.

In 1984, Rev. Neumark became the pastor  
of Transfiguration Lutheran Church  
in the South Bronx.

At that time, the South Bronx was groaning  
from decades of neglect by New York City.

Only the poorest of the poor lived there  
among the sewage treatment plants  
and burned out apartment buildings.

For the next 19 years, Rev. Neumark lived and worked  
among addicts and pushers,  
prostitutes,  
people with AIDS,  
gang members,  
and abused women and children.

There in that place of hopelessness  
lives began to change.

Together, transformed people and Rev. Neumark  
built low-income housing,  
created first rate schools,  
revived their church,  
planted trees,  
and helped each other weather life's storms.

One night about 2am Rev. Neumark's adult daughter, Ana,

woke her to ask her a pressing question.  
Ana had been up late googling family names.  
Her question concerned her mother's paternal grandfather.  
She asked her mother  
if she knew her grandfather was Jewish.  
Rev. Neumark did not,  
would have never guessed it in a million years.  
Both of her parents had been Lutherans.  
She had been a Lutheran pastor almost thirty years.  
She believed her parents had inherited  
their faith from their ancestors,  
generations of faithful Lutherans.  
But, there it was in black and white on Wikipedia.  
Her paternal grandfather,  
whom she knew as Moritz Neumark,  
was in reality Moses Lazarus Neumark.  
Ana's discovery led Rev. Neumark on a journey  
that transformed her understanding  
both of who she was and where she came from.

Rev. Neumark had always believed  
the story her father, Hans, had told her.  
He told her his parents, Moritz and Ida,  
had sent him to the US  
soon after he received his Ph. D.  
so he could have a more stable future.  
Then, not long after he left for America,  
his father died of a heart attack.  
Her father's story was true as far as it went.  
It just did not go far enough.

Over the next two years,  
Rev. Neumark learned her paternal grandparents  
came from a long line of devout, faithful Jews,  
many of whom on her father's side  
were rabbis and congregational leaders.  
This began to change  
when Moritz and Ida had their three children baptized.  
While they never formally renounced their faith,  
they did what they thought  
would "secure a future" for their children.

After Hitler's rise to power,  
Moritz and Ida realized baptism  
might not be enough to save them.  
They sent their two daughters to England  
and Hans, their only son, to the US.  
Three days after Hans left,  
Moritz and Ida were arrested  
and sent to the Theresienstadt concentration camp.  
Moritz died 29 days later.  
Ida lived until she was ninety.  
Three months before the camp was liberated,  
she volunteered to go to Switzerland  
and actually ended up there.

As she dug deeper to discover her hidden inheritance,  
Rev. Neumark learned that four of Moritz's six siblings  
and many of their children  
died in concentration camps.

The more she learned,  
the more she came face to face with the atrocities  
done to her family.

These discoveries brought her face to face  
with the truth that people of faith  
had participated in what happened to the Jews.

Luther, the father of the Reformation,  
wrote vile words against Jews,  
which in her words had a "ghastly harvest."

Good people, church people, had quietly assented  
to what Hitler was doing.

In the midst of all this,  
Rev. Neumark began to feel like a traitor  
to her "namesake Jews."

Yet, she could not turn away from her faith,  
from the faith that had prompted her father  
to hang his framed confirmation certificate  
on a wall in the bedroom  
he shared with his wife.

Rather, she chose to turn  
toward "another victimized, brutalized Jew,"  
who offered his body as bread.

When Jesus did this,

he lifted up “. . . the hope  
that life can go on,  
that one day we can sit together  
and share a healing, liberating meal,  
that shalom is possible.”

The journey Ana unwittingly initiated  
at 2am before Sunday morning worship  
was transfigurative for Rev. Neumark.  
It helped explain her commitment to marginalized people,  
and her passion for ministry,  
and her abiding interest in Hebrew  
and all things Jewish.

In her book, *Hidden Inheritance*,  
Rev. Neumark says,  
“From a history of horror,  
I have received staggering gifts  
of truth, identity, and love  
(and ended up where I always belonged).”

Brothers and sisters, God may not call us  
to live and work among the poorest of the poor.  
God may not call us to stand up to power  
on behalf of marginalized people.  
God may not call us to go in search  
of our ancestors.  
Nonetheless, God does call us  
and not only call us  
but passionately desires  
to transfigure our lives.  
God desires for us to discover our hidden inheritance,  
discover that we are all God's beloved children  
and Jesus' dearest brother or sister.  
This realization transfigures our lives,  
changes us from glory to glory,  
and helps us understand  
we have all received  
staggering gifts of truth, identity, and love.  
May it be so for you and me,  
for it is enough, more than enough,  
and it will bring us to where we belong,

our one true home. Amen.