

One of the great joys I find living in this part of the country is that the Adirondack Mountains aren't too far away. Climbing to the top of many of the mountains is relatively easy. My whole family can do it. And the views from on top are truly spectacular. From some rock outcroppings you can see for countless miles. If it is a warm summer day the sun is shining and a cool breeze is often passing over you. Great as it is, you cannot stay up on top of one of those mountains forever. Sooner or later you have to come down.

In our gospel reading we have an account of the Transfiguration of Jesus. What an amazing scene it is! Sermons often poke fun of Peter for saying, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." It is easy to criticize Peter for wanting to stay there and keep the mountaintop experience going. But that is not what Peter is really offering. You may remember me preaching before that Peter is really offering his services to Jesus to have a celebration of the Festival of the Booths. This was an end-of-time celebration the Jews of Jesus' day had and it involved setting up a whole bunch of booths or tents. In

many ways Peter is reading the situation correctly, just coming to a well-informed wrong conclusion. That is a very good way to begin to understand this passage. Peter is focused on what he believed could and should be, not what actually could be.

God's grace was coming in such an unexpected form that Peter had no real way of understanding. What was that grace? It would be the cross. The Transfiguration serves as the turning point in Jesus' public ministry. From here on out he is going to be focused on going to Jerusalem. The time for general preaching work throughout Galilee has come to its end.

Now we understand the rest of the story. Jesus goes to Jerusalem. He spends a week there around the Passover holiday. One of his disciples hands him over to the authorities. Jesus is arrested, tried, and condemned to death. He is then crucified on Good Friday and dies. But East Sunday comes a few days later and what looked like a tragic story has a more spectacular ending than anyone could have imagined. Yes, we do think we understand the rest of the story. We do think we understand the cross. Or do we, really?

If you've ever been on top of a mountain you know that you can see for miles and miles in every direction. The views are

spectacular. Maybe you think they're worth the effort it took to climb the mountain, or maybe you think they weren't worth the work, but you can still see for a long way. You get a different perspective on things. Distances and colors look different than they do down lower. Your understanding of the world might change from the different perspective. But like Peter, you still may not see it all clearly. I think we still have to keep our eyes open to even greater possibilities from God.

While the crucifixion is nowhere mentioned in our text, the cross overshadows this text. We know well that being crucified is a painful way to die. But let's also not forget it is a scandalous way to die. You didn't want to have it in your family background that one of your relatives was crucified. It was shameful. Jews believed that to be crucified meant that you were also cursed and rejected by God. Yet that is the method God chose to show his grace.

When Jesus first tells the disciples that he will be crucified and die Peter rebukes Jesus for it. This is simply not possible - to be cursed and rejected by God. This is crazy talk. But God's grace will come in unexpected ways. Things aren't always what they seem.

Sometimes I think we bring an unknowingly limited perspective to our faith. We think we know how things work, or how God works, but we really don't know. God works in strange and mysterious ways. It is our place to be open to God's possibilities even when we can't see the outcome. God may again be up to something new and surprising through us.

This is not a faith example, but I always like the story of the invention of the carburetor that is used on gasoline engines. As far as I know it is true, although I can't remember many of the details. In the earliest days of gasoline engines it was always a challenge to get the fuel and air to mix properly. The result was usually poor power from the engine, a lot of heat, and a waste of a lot of fuel. And then one day a man was watching his wife put perfume on. She had one of those little crystal perfume bottles with a rubber bulb that you squeezed to make the perfume spray. As she squeezed the bulb the man realized that if he could get gasoline to be in a mist like that it would be perfect for combustion! Now I have to question what is going on in a guy's mind if watching his wife spray herself with perfume makes him think about spraying explosive gasoline around, but you get the point. A great invention came out of something totally unrelated.

Never think you've figured out what God is up to, or that you know for certain what God is doing with your life. The moment you do is the moment you start closing your eyes to the possibilities of God's grace.

We may like mountaintop experiences. They are fun and exhilarating. We may think back to such a time in our lives and draw strength from that to get through a valley experience later on. That is perfectly okay. But if we are honest with ourselves, we also like life in the valley a lot too. Maybe it's not exciting. Maybe spectacular things don't happen. But it is safe, solid and secure. It is what we know and know how to live in. Even if it is bad, you've all heard the saying, "Better the devil you know rather than the devil you don't." And so we stay. We don't even dare to consider God's other possibilities.

What ultimately happens when we are in this state? These last years of recession and slow economic growth have shown us many examples of corporate executives who wanted to stay safe in their valleys. They ignored what was really happening and hoped it would go away. Even though the present wasn't good they believed that somehow by making cars the same way, or making film the same way, or flying airplanes the same way things would

get better. But they didn't. Some would say that many churches have been no different. The film example is still an unknown, but in the case of the auto industry, there had to be the death of a lot of things before they could rise again to profitability.

We like to have success build on success. On that mountaintop Peter was ready to take that magnificent and successful event and build it ever higher. God doesn't seem too interested in our ideas of success. They all had to leave that mountain and return to the valley. They had to travel to Jerusalem. And only after the pain, shame, curse, and death of the cross would the fullness of God's plans come to be.

I believe God comes to us in many ways all the time. I'm afraid that we ignore or dismiss them because they just don't make sense. Maybe from the mountaintop we do see what's coming. But it only looks like a cross, and we say, "That can't be God's will. God can't have that in mind." Remember, crucifixion meant more than just pain and death. Jews also considered it a cursed way to die. And so when God nudges us we may think, "You really can't mean that! That is cursed. That is too close to sin."

And yet you also know the real end of the story. Is crucifixion the end of Jesus? No, of course not! Resurrection is, and it isn't the end, but the beginning.

Don't miss what might be by God's grace because you can't see far enough, or you can't imagine vividly enough, or it just doesn't make any sense. The cross never comes at a convenient time. It does not come easily. It intersects us. It disrupts. It challenges everything. But it is the path to God's glory.
Amen