MOUNTAINS AND VALLEYS
SCRIPTURE: 2 CORINTHIANS 3:12-4:2

FOCUS: We are called to be those who shine from within with the light of God’s reflected glory, recognizing we must return to the mountain from time to time so the light may shine on us.

I enjoy going to the beach. More accurately I enjoy going to where I can sit and watch the beach. I do, on occasion, enjoy an hour or two lying out on a gritty beach chair, covered in lotion, sweat and sand, surrounded by a hoard of variously intoxicated folks, listening to fourteen different boom boxes at once. But what I really enjoy is sitting on a quiet balcony looking out over the water. There is something serene and peaceful about being there.

On a calm day, as the glassy waters reflect the sun, the ocean can appear to be as cool and solid as a marble slab. Those are the days for long naps. And then there is the awesome beauty of the storm tossed sea as clouds roll in and waves swell and crash against the shore. Those are the afternoons to simply watch and marvel at the power of it all. No two days watching the ocean are ever exactly the same. Perhaps the unpredictability is one of the reasons people have for all time been drawn to the sea.

I love observing the ocean, from a slight distance. Swimming is not my forte. I have never been SCUBA diving, and only a couple of times have I been snorkeling. I’m not particularly comfortable unless I can touch bottom. But one thing those couple of times, in relatively shallow waters, made crystal clear to me is the truth what you can observe and know about the ocean from afar, or even as you float above it, is only a tiny fraction of the true nature of this mysterious ecosystem.

You could be a sailor and live your whole life at sea; you could know every coastline, island and current; but if you have never stuck your head below the surface, you have only encountered a tiny fraction of what there is to know of the ocean. If you pull on a mask and stick your head down into the water, you will see some pretty amazing things, things you could only imagine as you floated above. In the big picture, however, you have barely scratched the surface and have encountered only a minuscule bit of the magnificent ocean. Yet a brief peek below will open your eyes to a whole new dimension and to the vastness which lies beyond your limited field of vision. There is an awful lot of reality down there you simply can’t experience until you repeatedly go beneath the watery veil of the ocean’s surface by diving into its depths.

In the reading we heard from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, he compares discovering the glory of God to taking off a veil. I think he would agree it is also much like taking the plunge to look beneath the surface. Only as we begin to remove what clouds and distorts our vision, and begin to look beyond all which limits our perception, only as we commit to the honest effort of peering more deeply than ever before into the realm of God’s truth do we truly encounter God’s Spirit which seeks to reveal to us important matters of faith and godliness.

We can read the Bible from cover to cover, attend church every week, go to Sunday School, gather for 34 weeks of Disciple Bible Study and regularly update our Facebook status with inspirational posts and still be like a sailor trying to know the ocean from the surface. We have all known the temptation to simply float on the surface of our faith. We have all, at times, been more than satisfied to enjoy the view from the safe comfortable distance of nominal commitment. We all must be reminded from time to time, there is a whole lot of godly reality we simply can’t see until we remove our veils, until we make the leap of real faith and jump in over our heads, diving deeply.

Paul knew we can’t bring ourselves to do such on our own. He knew because he, like each of us struggled to get below the surface. To the Corinthian church he proclaims boldly, only through Christ can the veil be removed. You can’t penetrate the surface of God’s amazing reality by trying harder and harder, you need Christ to remove the veil, to give you a shove, to open your eyes, and to reveal the depths of a reality beyond the scope of ordinary eyesight and conventional wisdom. When we allow it to happen, Paul says, we will witness and experience some incredible things. We will enter a whole new world, a world we have been obliviously floating above all along. The encounter, truly embraced, will begin to affect us dramatically, to reshape who we are at the very core of our being, freeing us to become more and more like Christ. The transformation may well be so significant it even impacts the way we look.

The gospel reading for today tells the story of what has come to be known as Jesus’ transfiguration. Three of the disciples, Peter, James and John accompany Jesus up the mountain and there experience the veil being pulled back in a dramatic fashion. On the mountain they catch a glimpse of far more godly reality than they ever anticipated witnessing. Most of the time as they traveled with Jesus they saw nothing about him which set him apart from other extraordinary mortals. To be sure he said and did some wonderful, even amazing things. Still, it was not immediately obvious to folks he was anything more than another prophet, another outstanding spiritual teacher, another gifted healer, or a combination of the three.

The trio of disciples climbed up a mountain with Jesus for a prayer retreat. They had been there before, for Jesus and his disciples made a practice of going aside periodically for prayer and renewal. It was a familiar activity and they were not expecting anything unfamiliar or out of the ordinary. Boy were they wrong! Isn’t that often how it works when we find ourselves drawn beneath the surface, when we have the veil at least partially lifted? We don’t go looking for the experience, it comes calling on us.

While Jesus was praying, his face lit up and suddenly Peter, James and John were able to see a whole lot more reality than they’d ever been able to see before. Suddenly, for a little while, the veil was pulled back for them and they caught a glimpse into the depths of a reality which lay beneath the surface of their lives with Jesus. In a moment they saw him shining with the full glory of heaven. They saw him engaged in conversation with great religious teachers and leaders of the past, Moses and Elijah. They witnessed the presence of God surrounding him as an awesome cloud.

The significance of the cloud would have been obvious and profound to the disciples, for God’s presence had often been depicted as a cloud throughout biblical history. Not only did they see the bright cloud and the brilliance of God’s reflected glory on Jesus’ face, they heard a heavenly voice from within the cloud declare him to be the chosen Son of God. And they were addressed by the voice as well, instructed to give their full attention to him, even more attention than they had in the past given to godly figures like Moses or Elijah.

None of what the disciples encountered was new, it had always been true, the disciples just hadn’t been able to see it on their own. They had been like sailors bobbing on the surface. But in a remarkable moment they were able to see beneath the surface into the depths. Suddenly the veil was pulled back and they could see a whole lot more reality than they’d ever seen before. And then just as they were looking for ways to build something permanent there on the mountain, as they sought to put down roots on the mountaintop, the moment was over, the cloud gone, the voice silent. Everything was back to normal again. Everything looked normal, but now they knew. Now they knew beneath the veil of normalcy there were depths of reality which cannot be encounter by simply skimming along the surface. Wonderful, astounding truths waiting to be discovered, yearning to be discovered.

As they pondered what they had experienced the disciples must have yearned to remain on the mountain for a while, but it was not to be. Jesus immediately led them straight back down the mountain to resume their ordinary lives did. Their reconnection with earthily reality came quickly. They were almost immediately reminded of the dark side of life in the real world as they encountered a spiritually tormented boy suffering from violent seizures. It was a horrendous situation of real suffering, and a scene with which the disciples were all too familiar, a scene which reminded them of their inadequacy. We are told the poor lad’s father had brought his son to the disciples who had stayed behind while Jesus and the three were on the mountain seeking help, but though they tried, they were unable to bring any relief.

Jesus faced no such inadequacy and he quickly brought healing to the boy, which may not have surprised the disciples as much as it astonished everyone else. The disciples had seen him do such things before, they had done so themselves, But Peter, James and John must have seen the powerful healing touch in quite a different light that day for they had been beneath the surface with Jesus. They had glimpsed the depths. While once they could only marvel at the wonder of what Jesus was doing, and what he had empowered them to do, now they understood not only what he could do, but who he really was and from whence his power came. No longer was there any question. No more did they struggle to decide whether Jesus was just another very gifted healer Now the disciples, at least three of them, at least for a while understood, for they had seen beneath the surface, for a few remarkable moments they had had the veil removed.

You and I won’t often, if ever have experiences like those three had on the mountain top, but then they would not have many of those moments either. Yet all of us who have offered ourselves to Christ are called to so live that the veil is pulled back little by little as we dive ever more deeply into the depths of God’s love and grace. If we remain alert and open to the movement of God’s Spirit we will surely have a variety of experiences, some big, most small, which enable us to see depths of reality we had never previously seen. We will spend time on the mountaintop in the clouds where we can hear the voice of God more clearly. We can’t make those moments happen, they come as God chooses, but we can provide an environment which makes us more likely to notice when they do. I find my problem is not God doesn’t regularly seek to lift the veil of distraction and selfishness which clouds my vision, rather I am often too eager to put it back on once it has been lifted for a while.

Peter, James and John were on a prayer retreat, for a short time they chose to disengage from all the noise and activity and demands of normal life to open themselves to God. We desperately need to do likewise, for we are far and away the most distracted and engaged people of all times. We are constantly available by phone, on the internet and occasionally face to face. We are incredibly connected, even in ways we don’t even realize, to people and organizations we don’t know. And we are a busy people, a driven people, a striving people, though we may not really understand what it is for which we strive.

The truth is, because of all our commitments we may not be able to wander off for days at a time, but we can put down the technology for a few minutes each day so we might simply be still and listen for the voice of God. We can set aside time every week to gather with others for worship. We can make an effort to put aside all our petty fault finding and complaining, choosing instead to search out ways to serve. And when we do, often when we least expect it, the veil will be lifted just a bit more. As it is, and as we venture ever more deeply into the vastness of God’s grace we come to see more and more of the wonderful light of God’s grace, and we too will begin to shine a bit.

But be forewarned, whether such and encounter happens for you here in worship, or away on retreat, or just spontaneously and completely out of the blue, the next step after having a bit of the veil lifted is always the same. Jesus leads us back down the mountain to reconnect with the activity and demands of routine, daily, life with all its pain and struggle. But life, even with all its pain and struggle, will never look quite the same. You will re-enter the life of service and mission for which you were created with a new, ever clearer, vision of what it is all about. Christ is willing and read to pull back the veil from our eyes. He is calling for us to get out of the boat and to dive deeply.

Because we are so very human, we will never fully comprehend the wonder of God’s light and grace in this life. As Paul said elsewhere, we will always see the truth as if we were looking at it in a clouded mirror. And because we are so very human, we will inevitably fall back into old habits, will inevitably allow the memories of what we have seen fade. In our Old Testament text we heard of how Moses would put on a veil for a very different reason. He put it on so his people could not see the glorious shine which had been on his face coming down the mountain was beginning to dissipate. Even Moses had to go back up the mountain from time to time to have his glow replenished. So must we from time to time. We to back up the mountain, we dive back into the deep, we allow the veil to again be lifted so we may discover more and more of the magnificence of God’s power, might and grace. And each new vision will sustain us, transfigure us, and cause us to shine just a bit more brightly as we are molded more and more into what we were created to be, the glorious, body of Christ. For your sake, for the sake of a world filled with darkness and for the sake of the kingdom of God let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN.