

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**February 15, 2015; The Last Sunday after the Epiphany**

**Readings:** 2 Kings 2:1-12, Psalm 50:1-6; 2 Corinthians 4:3-6

### **The Importance and Purpose of Mountaintop Experiences**

Lent comes early this year---beginning this Wednesday with Ash Wednesday---which means that this Sunday is the Last Sunday after the Epiphany---which means we have the account of the Transfiguration of Jesus as our Gospel reading. ...the final great moment of Epiphany, of knowing...of knowing about Jesus, before they continue the journey that is leading, quickly at this point, to the cross.

We hear the story of the mountain top experience of the inner circle of disciples...they see the appearance of Jesus change; they see Elijah with Moses...they hear God's voice from a cloud, "this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"

This final great moment of Epiphany before embarking on what would be the final part of Jesus' life on earth...what does this moment teach us about Jesus and about the Christian life, about being the beloved community?

In the middle of this experience, Peter, not knowing what to say, but apparently thinking that he should say something, says, "why don't we build some structures, for you, Jesus...and Moses and Elijah"...let's build some structures and, it is implied, stay here. ...let's contain this thing...give it some order...and get comfortable with what we already know. But the voice says, not, "nice idea, build some structures," but rather "listen."

“Listen.”

“Listen.”

“Listen to Jesus...this is going somewhere...this moment is not the culmination...not the place to remain...but an experience to give you spiritual nourishment for the journey in the world.”

And down the mountain they go...into a world hostile to Jesus...to his message...to his words of wisdom and acts, of both love and challenge,..that brought people together, broke down divisions, taught that all people are God’s children...this was good news to most, but not to all.

..not to those in positions of power who benefited from systems that favored them but keep most people poor and subjugated.

Those moments of knowing God, of comfort, of spiritual experience, of mountain top experiences...are real, and they are gifts to us.

In themselves, they are good. God wants to share God’s life and love with us...these experiences are good in and of themselves.

And these experiences are intended to help us deal with the day to day challenges of life, and perhaps, be part of a call to tackle some really difficult issues.

We can’t stay on the mountaintop...but would we want to if we could?

Would we want to, knowing that this world needs us to represent Christ in both the halls of power and in the less visible alleys of life...representing Christ, being light in the world, so that we can be the voice a of justice ...and stand with those who need us...who need a friend...who need us to help increase the light their lives, in our world?

I had been wanting to see the movie *Selma*, and I did on Friday.

There is much I could say about that movie...about the heart-breaking brutality and injustice, so well portrayed in the film, and the

determination, courage and heroism of Martin Luther King Jr.  
and all those who stood and marched with him, especially  
those African-Americans who so bravely struggled  
against racism before any of the cameras and  
reports were on the scene.

My generation is something of a bridge generation between the days of  
legal segregation and what came after...born in 1968, I don't  
remember segregation or the worst of obvious, totally  
unchecked, basically legal, racism in this country,  
but I do remember

being bused around to different schools in Winchester Virginia in the early  
1970s as the White majority fought against integration...I didn't know  
why I had to change schools at the time.

It would be interesting to have a group discussion of the movie *Selma* to  
hear what touches you about the movie...what comes up for  
you...what memories come to you...how it inspires you.

As the movie ends, there is a song, as the credits roll, which mentions  
Ferguson...and sadly some of our memories of injustice and brutality  
are not very old.

As far as we have come; the struggle to end racism in this country  
continues.

On the same day that I saw the movie, I accompanied Grant to his  
interview with the diocesan Committee on Priesthood.

This was Grant's interview for what we call "postulancy."

If one is approved by the Committee and then made a postulant by our  
Bishop, then one is on the road to seminary and ordination.

But what does that mean, what can that mean?

And I could ask the same question about baptism.

What does it mean to commit oneself to Christ?

It means we can't stay on that mountain top, doesn't it?

The life of Martin Luther King Jr. ---and the lives of those who were with him in that time in that fight against racism---shows the power of a “lived faith” engaging the matters of the day....engaging and challenging the evils of times in which we live.

The movie *Selma* shows the Church being the Church...what that can be...it is beautiful and it is scary...because it often requires sacrifice, it may require your life, my life, as it did then for some, and still does.

Having just been at those diocesan interviews that vet individuals sensing a call to ordained ministry...and seeing that movie...well, it made me wonder...for what do we think are interviewing aspirants? ---to be part of something that is a set structure, predictable and safe? Or are we interviewing for ordination and baptizing people for a calling that involves sacrifice and struggle against the powers and principalities?

“Let’s build some structures,” Peter says.

And God says, “Listen,” ...”Listen.” and Jesus leads them down the mountain...into the messiness of everyday life.

The Christian life requires on-going discernment...listening...and then acting on what we believe God is calling us to do, in both the small things and the big things, no matter what the cost.

I’m happy to say that the centrality of on-going, life-long, discernment of call was named during Grant’s interview with the Committee on Priesthood.

There have been many times that Christians and Churches have stayed on the “mountain top” choosing not to engage the issues of the day...maintaining that the spiritual life is not about the matters of the day, not about politics or economics or the environment.

But that is a misunderstanding of Christianity.

That would be like getting a driver’s license and never driving a car.

But it can go just as wrong in the other way too...it’s not a good idea to

drive a car without learning how to do it and getting the license.  
Deep faith, deep connection with God, combined with a love of people  
and justice for all...is a powerful combination.  
We come down from our mountaintop experience with Jesus, ready to be  
about God's work in the world.

If you find these ideas interesting, I think you will really like our Lenten  
program for this year.

We are reading and discussing Howard Thurman's book, *Jesus and the  
Disinherited*.

First published in 1949, this book was a favorite of Martin Luther King Jr.; it  
is said that he always carried a copy with him.

Howard Thurman and his work are described in the Forward to the most  
recent edition by Vincent Harding in these words: this "*seminal  
work...can be...described as a profound quest for a liberating  
spirituality, a way of exploring and experiencing those  
crucial life points where personal and societal  
transformation are creatively joined.*

*It is the centerpiece of the Black prophet-mystic's lifelong attempt to  
bring the harrowing beauty of the African-American experience  
into deep engagement with what he called 'the religion of  
Jesus'.*

*Ultimately his goal was to offer this humanizing combination as the  
basis for an emancipatory way of being, moving toward a  
fundamentally unchained life that is available to all the  
women and men everywhere who hunger and thirst for  
righteousness, especially those, "who stand with  
their backs against the wall."<sup>1</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Thurman, Howard. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1976. Original pub. 1949 by Abingdon-Cokesbury Press.. "Forward" by Vincent Harding, 1996 edition. EPub, Loc. 11 of 1368.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration comes to us today for our on-going transformation.

Jesus and his friends came down the mountain, and so do we, so as to experience those, "life points where personal and societal transformation are creatively joined."<sup>2</sup>

Through God's grace we are able to listen and discern God's call to us, both God's call to us to be nourished by God spiritually and God's call to us to engage the issues and concerns of our times, so as to live into the fullness of who God calls us to be for our benefit,  
the benefit of others,  
and to God's glory.  
Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*