

**Mountaintops, Valleys, and Plains**  
**February 11, 2024**

There once was a little girl who loved Christmas. She wished that it could be Christmas every day of the year.

When the girl was 7 years old, she woke up on Christmas morning and experienced all the wonders of the holiday. She came into the living room saw the Christmas tree with piles of presents under it for her and her siblings. Her stocking was filled with treats.

The girl had a splendid Christmas day. She ate too much candy; she visited relatives; she ate a delicious turkey dinner with her family; and then because everyone had woken up early, tempers were running short in the evening, so there was some bickering and then everyone went to bed.

The next morning, the little girl slept late. She was awoken by her brothers and sisters dancing around her bed, yelling “It’s Christmas!”

The girl sat up and said, “Nonsense! It was Christmas yesterday!”

Her siblings said, “We don’t know about that. In any case, it’s Christmas today.” And they all ran into the living room, and there was the Christmas tree and piles of presents and full stockings. And the girl realized her wish had come true.

The parents seemed vaguely aware that they had done something like this the day because, but they supposed they must have dreamed it. Presents were opened, candy was eaten, relatives were visited, turkey was enjoyed, bickering ensued, and everyone went to bed.

The next day, the same thing happened again, with more presents and shorter tempers. By the end of the week, everyone was grumpy all the time, and the gifts were piling up and there was no room to put the new toys that kept coming.

It continued on through January and February and April and July. Turkeys started getting so scarce so that they sold for exorbitant prices. All the Christmas tree farms were stripped bare of trees. People didn’t give presents nicely anymore; they just flung them at each other, or threw them at neighbors over the fence. The only people who were doing well were the shopkeepers and candy makers, who were obscenely rich.

By Thanksgiving, everyone hoped Christmas would never come again, including the little girl. But after giving it some thought, she wished that Christmas would go back to being just once a year.

Finally, December 26<sup>th</sup> dawned, and there were no presents, no turkey, no caroling. And the little girl knew that her wish had been granted again.

William Dean Howells, “Christmas Every Day.” Public Domain.

This story was written by William Dean Howells in 1892 to answer the question that almost every child has asked at some point: “Why can’t every day be Christmas?” Surely you can’t have too much of a good thing!

I think Peter in our Gospel story would agree. Today we hear the story of the Transfiguration, a story we hear each year. Jesus goes up on a mountain with his inner circle of disciples, and he is transformed. Moses and Elijah appear, the two most well-known and central figures of the Jewish faith.

At that point, Peter speaks up. “Teacher, it’s good that we’re here. Tell you what: James, John, and I can build a few huts. We’ll put up one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” It’s a weird enough statement that the narrator has to add an explanation for this strange offer. “Peter didn’t know what to say, because he was scared out of his wits.”

What I see in Peter’s words are an acknowledgement that this is a sacred moment. More than that, this is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. When has Elijah ever appeared to someone, let alone Elijah AND Moses? And these three hooligan disciples are there to witness it.

So Peter wants to set up camp. This conference is going to last a while (or so he imagines), so we are going to build some little houses and stay here for a spell.

And who can blame Peter? When Moses went up on the mountain to talk with God and his face shone, Moses was up there for 40 days and 40 nights. It’s fair to think that this crew might be camping on the mountaintop for that length of time too.

God wakes Peter up a bit and says, “This is my Son. Listen to him!” Snap out of it! Jesus is the important piece here, not the conference, not the physical location.

And then the moment is over. Elijah and Moses are gone. And the disciples come down the mountain with Jesus, who tells them to keep this a secret until after the resurrection – which won’t be long, because Jesus is now heading to Jerusalem, where he will be killed.

The temptation of Peter is to dwell on that mountaintop experience, the high of that wonderful moment. Just like the temptation of that little girl was to dwell on Christmas, that wonderful day, and to wish that it could last forever.

Sometimes the temptation for us in our lives is to dwell on joyful moments in the past, to talk about the “good old days” rather than living our lives now. To be fair, there’s nothing wrong with having happy memories. But to dwell solely on those moments, to try to live only on the mountaintop has a cost. It prevents us from seeing Jesus’ presence NOW.

Jesus is as present in the valleys as he is on the mountaintop.

That is, after all, the power of Jesus’ human nature, of Emmanuel. On the one hand, Jesus does these amazing deeds:

- his face is transformed;

- he calms a storm with a word;
- he raises Lazarus from the dead.

And then on the other hand, he has these very human moments.

- Before calming the storm, he is taking a nap on the boat
- He cries when Lazarus dies
- He gets stressed and wakes up early to go pray, as we heard last week.

Both the story of Jesus and our lives consists of mountains (wondrous moments) and valleys (dark, difficult moments), and everything in between.

That's the human experience, and Jesus knows all about it.

I'll share with you an experience that I had that illustrated this point for me. When I was in seminary, we had worship three times a week, led by students of various denominations. One morning, before worship, I checked my email. There was a message from a college friend of mine telling me that another friend of ours had lost his life. He in his mid-20s.

I was pretty distraught, as you might imagine. Soon after that, I walked to the school chapel, glad that it was time for worship so that I could sit with God for a bit.

As it happened, the sermon that morning was offered by a student. It was through no fault of his own, but the timing was horrible. The sermon was about how we should be happy, that that is part of our Christian call.

I was angry to hear that. Because at the moment, I needed church to be a place where I could grieve. Be honest with God and just be sad and to lift up my friend. I didn't want a mountaintop experience. I wanted to know that God was with me in this valley and that God was with my friend.

My experience that morning shaped how I understood the church.

If this morning, you have just received painful news, and you need a place to be sad and to know that God is with you, this place is for you.

If you are at a mountaintop, if you are joyful and experiencing a sense of lightness, this place is for you.

If you had an average week, with nothing to note – no mountaintops, no valley, but just a solid week on the plains, this place is for you.

Jesus has been through it all, and it's a gift for us to know that. Mountaintop, plain, or valley, you are not alone.

I'd like to close with a prayer. It's one of my favorites from our prayer book, and I know it's a favorite of many of yours as well. It comes from the service of Compline, which is said at

bedtime. One of the reasons that it appeals to me is that it lifts up everyone, whether on mountaintops, on plains, or in the valleys.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

*Book of Common Prayer 1979, 134.*

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