



“On the Mountaintop”

Transfiguration of Our Lord
Saturday and Sunday, February 10–11, 2018
All Services
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6;
2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

In many ways, today's gospel is a Super Bowl worthy commercial for outdoor ministries. The Transfiguration is the ultimate mountaintop experience! Jesus – the greatest camp counselor the world has ever known, takes a small group of Counselors in Training on a hike up a mountain to a place apart... and on that mountaintop, Peter and James and John literally saw Jesus in a new way, and the direction of their lives shifted forever.

For the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel, as in these past weeks of Epiphany, we've been learning about who Jesus is through his actions and words. We've been invited to come and see, and to follow, and to be part of this new thing that God is doing. Throughout it all, Peter, James, and John and the other disciples were amazed, confused, overwhelmed, impressed, and today, they're terrified. They are, as the kids say, feeling all the feels.

I'm sure they thought they had a pretty good grasp of who this Jesus was, but on THIS day, for Peter and James and John on the top of a mountain, in that place apart, God's glory in Jesus Christ was revealed to them in a new – and very clear way. Mark tells us that Jesus was changed into something so beautiful and blinding white - even whiter than anything in a Tide commercial! The disciples saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah, revealing that their teacher and friend was the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets. And, as if that wasn't enough, the very voice of God came from the cloud and told them: This is my son ... Listen to him.

In that moment, Peter, James, and John not only understood who Jesus was in a whole new way, but they had been very clearly enlightened as to what their response should be. “LISTEN TO HIM.” From that point forward, everything was different – and not just for the disciples, but for Jesus as well. Their whole direction changed.

We know (because we've all read ahead) that when they descended the mountain, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem, where he would eventually be arrested and tried and crucified. Three days later he would rise from the dead, so that Peter and James and John and you and I and all of God's beloved might see the shining face of Jesus.

That day on the mountaintop changed everything.

About 15 years ago, shortly after I began serving as Nawakwa's director, I got a phone call out of the blue from a woman named Betty, who identified herself as the granddaughter of Hadwin Fischer, Nawakwa's founder. She and her brother were going to be in the area on Saturday and were hoping that it would be okay to stop by for a visit – which, of course, it was.

I was pretty excited to meet Nawakwa Royalty, but when Saturday morning rolled around, the weather was dreadful. It was raining and cold and dreary beyond belief, but I filled my travel mug with hot coffee, and my big dog Cyril and I got in the car and headed to camp, hoping that our special visitors would also brave the weather.

Betty and her brother Richard did not disappoint. At precisely 9:30, I saw them walking toward the office. We all reached the door at the same time. As I pulled open the interior door, Betty opened the storm door and pulled me into an embrace, while Cyril pushed past me to greet Richard. All of a sudden, I had the horrifying thought that they might not be dog people, but it was too late to do anything about it because Cyril was a people dog... and he was also 90 pounds of pure, fluffy happiness, and there was no stopping him.

As it turned out, I had no need to fear, because from deep inside Betty's embrace, I heard Richard, now crouched down on the office porch, and he was saying, "Ohwhoareyou? Areyouanicedoggie? Yesyouareanicedoggiearentyou?"

Cyril was, indeed, a very nice doggie.

And I was greatly relieved that they were dog people.

Betty and Richard had not been to Nawakwa in years and wanted to see the place despite the weather. Before stepping outside, Richard asked if I had a bible he could borrow – which I did... we are a church camp, after all.

Our first stop was the dining hall, where we have a lot of photographs from Nawakwa's history, including a large portrait of Dr. Fischer. Betty and Richard were so delighted to see Grandpa Fischer hanging on the wall that they both took out their cameras and started taking pictures of the pictures on the wall.

We made our way around the room, and it was fascinating and lovely to watch the two siblings looking at photographs from the 1920s and 30s and referring to people who were completely unknown to me, using names such as "Mama," "Gramma," and "Uncle Bob."

Even though it was raining, we walked out to Fischer Memorial Chapel.

While there, I was able to share with them the story of that place, one of Nawakwa's most sacred spaces, and how that huge rock, sticking out of the earth, directly in front of the large stone altar, was a favorite spot of their grandfather. I told them how he would retreat there from the main camp to read his bible and pray and listen for God's word. I shared with them how, when Dr. Fischer died just 10 years into Nawakwa's life,

Dr. Fischer's friends chose that spot to create that beautiful woodland chapel in his memory.

While there, I also told them stories of Grandpa Fischer's legacy, and how the ministry he started had grown and changed. We talked about Nawakwa's descendants – camps that borrowed and duplicated goals and curriculum and even building designs in an effort to create more centers of church leadership development. I shared with them stories of growth and change in the camping corporation: the success and growth of Kirchenwald, and how our two camps, just 50 miles apart as the crow flies, neither compete with nor duplicate the other's program... rather we complement each other to carry out that shared mission of strengthening the church – a mission begun by their grandfather.

I told them about our various programs and our incredible staff of young people looking for real ministry leadership opportunities.

I told them about our newest ministry at the time: The Wittel Farm and House of Prayer and the unique programming in that place and the growth we dreamed of for the future.

Betty and Richard's time was running short, but they really wanted to see Upper Temple, the one place that seemed to have made an impression on their memories. I wasn't surprised; they're not alone in that. Upper Temple is Nawakwa's mountaintop chapel, and it has a panoramic view of the surrounding valleys lined with fruit orchards, Gettysburg to the southeast, and the first range of the Appalachian Mountains to the west. It's stunning. Thousands of campers have fond memories of singing evening vespers while watching the glorious Upper Temple sunsets. It's only about a half a mile from the center of camp, but, as its name suggests, the walk to Upper Temple is entirely uphill.

It was still drizzling, so we decided to drive.

We got out of their car at the top of the hill and walked into center of the stone amphitheater. Richard stopped in his tracks and blurted out, "THIS is the place. I can see it all. Mother and Dad would have been there... and Grandpa Fischer would have been right there... and Verna, and Otto..."

And now it was time for Betty and Richard to tell me a story – a story that has become my favorite Nawakwa story. I've shared countless times, but I'll give you the Reader's Digest version, in case you haven't heard it.

It's the story of how, in 1936, Herman Hammer, Betty and Richard's father, was graduating from Gettysburg seminary, and was about to realize his life's dream of becoming a missionary... except that he was missing one requirement on the list of qualifications: he needed to be married prior to deployment (which was just a few weeks away), and Herman was a single man.

So, Herman called Camp Nawakwa and asked to speak with Marian Fischer, the camp director's daughter. When she came to the phone, he explained his situation: that he needed a wife – quickly – and he proposed marriage... with the enticing promise of moving halfway around the world for an undetermined length of time.

My favorite part of the story is Marian's response. She asked Herman, "Can you give me the weekend to think about it?"

Betty told me that her mother spent the weekend in conversation with her parents and her trusted friends on the Nawakwa faculty, weighing her options and considering this opportunity that had come as quite a surprise.

Marian Fischer was faithful and brave and evidently up for adventure, because when Herman called back on Monday and romantically asked her, "Well, whataya say?" Marian's response was, "I'm game!" (It's truly one of the great love stories of all time.)

They were married just a few days later, with Dr. Fischer officiating, and the Hammers soon left for South America, where they served the church and raised their family for the next forty years.

Their wedding took place at Upper Temple, and that was, of course, what Richard was seeing in his mind's eye as he stood on the very ground where his parents made promises to each other before God. It was a lovely moment, and they had told their parents' story so well, that I might have been convinced that I, too, could see the wedding party standing before us.

Then Betty said, "Yes. This is the place," and she reached into her pocket and took out a small plastic bag ... and Rick removed that borrowed bible from his jacket... and I realized that the purpose of their visit that day was for something much more than nostalgic sightseeing.

Recognizing that they were there for the purpose of scattering their parents' ashes on the spot where they began their life together, I knew that it was time for me to give my new friends some space. So, I quietly began to back away as Richard opened the bible.

What happened next was something I hope I never forget.

Betty reached out and grabbed my arm, and she said, "No, you stay. You're part of this now."

So, I stepped back into that space, and listened as Richard read from the psalms. Then, as the three of us stood on that mountaintop holding hands, Betty offered a beautiful prayer of thanksgiving and praise for her parents and her grandparents and their lives of faithful witness.

And as the ashes of Herman and Marian were scattered there on that rainy morning, I found myself weeping with my new friends over the life and death of people I had

never known and hadn't even heard of an hour before... which was odd ... and really beautiful... because that is the kind of deep connectedness and holy encounter we experience when we open ourselves to really being the Body of Christ.

That morning on the mountaintop, several things became clear to me when my own call to serve was spoken by Betty just about as clearly as the voice of God spoke to the disciples.

"You're part of this now."

And the "this" she was talking about was far greater than a simple memorial service for Herman and Marian. "This" was Grandpa Fischer's mission to strengthen the Body of Christ at a little church camp in Adams County, and to do so faithfully and carefully, enlisting the help and expertise of others to provide hospitality and faith formative experiences, to equip and empower leadership, and to collect and share the stories faithful lives well lived.

There was certainly no dazzling light in the sky on that rainy morning, but my heart was most certainly enlightened, and the direction of my life changed in ways that I'm still discovering... and I'm so very grateful for having had that mountaintop experience.

Even though I am the camp director, and a big part of my job is to encouraging people to come to camp, I have to be honest with you and tell you that holy encounters are not so much about the mountain. They're about seeing the light of the Risen Christ shining all around us each and every day, because, when we are enlightened by the light of Christ, we reflect that light out into the world.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is shining in this place today – in the faces of those around you, in the voices of children, in the many ways this community cares for one another and those outside our walls. But, most especially, Jesus shines in the promise of forgiveness and new life, offered to all through his body and blood.

As you leave this mountaintop, remember that we, God's beloved children, carry and reflect the shining light of the risen Christ into a dark world. So, shine... Be the light of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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