

“Peak Experiences”

7:30AM, IHM

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Today’s gospel presents us with a mountaintop vision, literally a peak experience. Here in Colorado, we pride ourselves on mountaintop visions, grand vistas from the Colorado Monument or the Grand Mesa, the view from Dead Horse Point in Utah, the breathless panorama atop Pike’s Peak.

We are told that Jesus was conversing with Moses and Elijah, both of whom had had peak experiences. Moses spoke to God face to face on Mount Sinai, where he was entrusted with the commandments to guide his people through the desert. Elijah had fled for his life to Mount Horeb (the same Mount Sinai) trying to escape the murderous intents of Jezebel. There God spoke to him in a “still, small voice,” giving him courage to go forward to anoint a new king and to anoint Elisha as his successor.

Likewise Jesus is at a turning point in his mission. There are those who seek his life, as well as those who try to live faithfully God’s law that he teaches. On the mountaintop, he is able to see with God’s own vision the way forward in faithfulness. Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem, knowing that suffering and death await him, but also the glory in which he is now clothed.

What peak experiences have you had? What transforming enlightenment or profound feeling never experienced before? Pope Benedict describes peak experiences as having the grace to experience a strong sense of the presence of God.

Parents have told me of their experience as new parents, holding their child for the first time, amazed that in an instant they could love another human being so fiercely and completely. Others have described experiencing a relentless struggle, feeling anxious and uncertain for months. Suddenly a feeling of peace surrounds them like a warm blanket and reaches within to the core of

their being. Now the way lies open. They see where they are going after feeling lost and abandoned.

Another told me of their marriage conflict. Their quarreling had accelerated into a full battle, shouting and falsely misjudging each other, each threatening to consider terminating that relationship. Amazingly, they suddenly stood back to observe the warfare from outside and it became clear to them what blind dolts they had been. Reconciliation transformed their relationship – not all at once, but with a firm beginning.

Finally, at the age of seventy-five, imagine that you are like Abraham, ready to close the book on life, call an end to striving to go beyond where you are. Suddenly you are called – the word literally means “summoned” – and you discover new meaning, new purpose. You realize that someone else needs what you have to offer; you can make a new mark. Come with me, Sarah; we have work to do.

These are peak experiences. Remember Martin Luther King’s address on the night before he was assassinated. He said he had been to the mountain top and had seen the promised land. He set aside all fears and assured his followers that even if he were killed, as a people they would get to the promised land.

Tomorrow is the fourth anniversary of Cardinal Bergoglio becoming Pope Francis. His appearance that evening, first asking the people to bless him before he blessed them, was not immediately perceived as a peak experience for the church assembled. From hindsight, after four years of his exceptional leadership, there have been many peak experiences – deeper revelations of how he has made it his mission to reform and transform the church.

Come back to 2005, following the death of Pope John Paul II. At that time, the Cardinals were faced with choosing someone like John Paul, another European, or choosing an outsider. John Paul had been so universally admired that they decided they needed to choose someone close to him. They chose Cardinal Ratzinger, his friend and mentor, who became Pope Benedict XVI. The

outsider being considered at that time was Cardinal Bergolio of Argentina. Eight years later, after Pope Benedict resigned, the Cardinals had no trouble in choosing an outsider. Hence, Pope Francis of Argentina.

As a Jesuit, one might have assumed that Francis would take the name of his order's founder, becoming Pope Ignatius of Loyola. There had never been a pope with that name. Instead, as we know, he chose the patron saint he most admired, Francis of Assisi. There had never been a pope with that name. The commitment of St. Francis to the poor, to a respect for the environment (Brother Sun, Sister Moon), to an emphasis on a Church that found itself at home in the streets were values he shared. The new pontiff's emergence as a "peace pope" should have been no surprise, because St. Francis had always been Christianity's premier apostle of peace. (Make me an instrument of your peace.)

What the Cardinals wanted most of all in March of 2013 was an outsider with few ties to the Vatican, who could engage in cleaning house, reforming the central government of the church. They got what they wanted! Pope Francis has made that goal a central part of his mission

On my part, I have found that Pope Francis' three major writings have become rather "peak experiences" for me in seeing the church I thought I knew in a different and more brilliant light. These writings are: "The Joy of the Gospel," on treasuring the role of God's Word as a great gift received, "On Care for our Common Home," the internationally acclaimed encyclical on the environment, and "The Joy of Family Love," appreciating the joy of giving, not just receiving. The final document reflected his summary of the two world synods on the family.

On Holy Thursday, March 28, 2013, hardly two weeks into his administration, Pope Francis provided a peak experience for juvenile inmates of Rome's largest youth prison, the Casal del Marmo, six miles across town from the Vatican. Tradition called for Holy Thursday to be celebrated by the pope at St. Peter's Basilica in an elaborate ceremony, washing the feet of twelve priests as a sign of the institution of the priesthood.

Francis chose to regard the priesthood as a matter of service rather than power. He chose to wash the feet of both men and women, both Christian and Muslim inmates. Unheard of! As he was leaving, one of the inmates suddenly cried out, "I just want to know why you came." Francis replied, "It was a feeling that came from my heart. Things of the heart don't have an explanation, they just come. This is a symbol, it is a sign. Washing your feet means I am at your service. Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches. This is what I do,"

A year later, Francis chose Holy Thursday to visit the Don Gnocchi center for the elderly and disabled, where he washed and kissed the feet of twelve patients, ranging in age from sixteen to eighty-six. Several of them were in wheel chairs, with their feet extremely swollen or disfigured. A peak experience for them, too! Francis arrived in a blue Ford Focus, by then his trademark means of transportation around town.

Jesus' disciples were privileged to experience Jesus' Transfiguration as the ground for their hope in the face of suffering to come. We have been privileged to witness an extraordinary pope, an outsider who is doing all he can to bring new light and hope for the church and for the world. What a gift we have received in Pope Francis.