

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 17:1-12

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 17-18

¹ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ Then Peter said, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁵ While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" ⁶ When the disciples heard it, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about this vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." ¹⁰ And they asked him, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" ¹¹ He replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things, ¹² but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So, also, the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands."

Matthew 17:1-12

02/19/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

"Cloud Cover: Not Every Mountaintop View Gives Vision"

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One of the favorite devices of comedians is that of garbled communication. An Italian gentleman was trying to learn English. He asked an American friend, "What is a polar bear?" His friend, assuming his Italian friend had seen a nature special or something, replied that a polar bear is a bear that lives up North. The Italian asked, "But what does this polar bear do?" That seemed like kind of strange question to the American, but he tried to answer as best as he could. "Well, I suppose he hangs out on the ice and eats fish."

"Oh, no," said the Italian, "I will not do it." His befuddled American friend asked, "What won't you do?" to which the Italian replied, "I have just been asked to be a polar bear at a funeral." [2 ¶s from "What We Have Is A Communication Problem" by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

We may laugh at stories like that, but when it comes to relationships, garbled communication isn't necessarily a laughing matter. How many marriages, friendships, churches have been deeply hurt all because people were talking past each other—because communication was somehow flawed?

God attempted to communicate with us through law and covenant. He sent prophets to call us to faithfulness and priests to lead us to worship. But when those avenues proved insufficient, God came to us in Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of God's word to us. When words failed to communicate the depth of God's love and the fullness of living in relationship with God, then the Lord sent one to live that love and that relationship in his being and his breath. Jesus is not a rule or a story or a scroll. Jesus meets us, interacts with us, touches us, moves within our hearts and our beings.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday—the final Sunday in the season of epiphany. Since the Magi journeyed to Jerusalem more than a month ago now, we have studied scripture lessons that reveal something of who God is. The themes of light, insight, revelation, and vision have come to us through beloved psalms, guest preachers and old friends. And today, it comes to us in the person of Christ Jesus, God's word made flesh, the revelation of God's life among us, the embodiment of God's love for us. He has been teaching. You are salt. You are light. You are fruit. He has been healing. Take heart,

your faith has made you whole. He has been dreaming. I tell you: the kingdom of God is coming among you. And he has been prophesying. The son of man must undergo great suffering, and be crucified, and on the third day, rise again. And that's a lot of pieces, and the disciples just can't figure out how to put it all together.

In particular, my heart goes out to Peter. If you put what's happening here in Matthew 17 in context, we recall that in chapter 16, Jesus has been dealing with all kinds of criticism from the scribes and the pharisees, and they wind up moving around quite a bit just to find freedom for Jesus to be in ministry and avoid all the wrangling. In a rare moment of peace aboard the boat, Jesus asks the Disciples what people are saying about him. Who do they say I am? Jesus asks. Elijah, John the Baptist, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. What about you? Who do you say I am? Jesus wants to know. And a rare moment of clarity, Simon declares: You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. To which Jesus responds, "You are no longer Simon, but Peter (which means Rock) and on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." For Peter, this is a transformative moment. Like Jacob who wrestles with God at Peniel and is renamed Israel, this is a moment not just for him as an individual but for all those who follow.

But how quickly it all goes south. Jesus then begins to teach them that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. And then Matthew tells us that Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." But Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 16:21-25).

And then six days pass. Six days about which Matthew tells us nothing. What happened those days? What are they thinking? What are they feeling? Is Peter feeling very "rock"-like? Or is he bewildered? Exhausted? He and his friends are fishermen. And yet, they dropped their nets, left their boats, given up their livelihood to follow Jesus. They've witnessed and participated in amazing things. But they've also heard troubling teaching. They've seen enough to trust Christ's divinity, but they're anxious and uneasy about the path he's laid out. What he does looks godly, but what he says sounds hellish. Is it any wonder they're confused, plagued with genuine doubts and hard questions? And that's when Jesus leads them up a mountain, where his true self is revealed in transcendent light. Indeed, he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, not a reflection of divine light and energy, but its source: the living embodiment of law and prophesy, the culmination of history.

Traditionally, scholars, theologians, and preachers have talked about Jesus' transfiguration as an incredible moment of epic significance—the quintessential mountaintop experience. And they're not wrong. It is. Words are so inadequate. Dazzling white robes, a changing face, Moses and Elijah. What happened, exactly, is anyone's guess. The record is clearly more than the sum of the words on the page. Scholars call this a 'theophany'—that is, a human encounter with the divine whereby something of the divine nature is revealed. But any scholar of note will hasten to add that theophanies are, by their very nature, mysterious. Just because we can label it doesn't mean we can describe it. It's a never-to-be-forgotten story. But it's also a never-to-be-repeated event. Which begs the question: so what?

Well, we tell this story year after year at the culmination of the epiphany season because it is the ultimate revelation. It is in just that moment that Peter, James, and John have this tremendous experience. Like Jacob, who wrestled with God; like Moses who climbed Mt. Sinai; like Elijah stuck in a crevice listening for the still small voice of God, these three disciples saw the face of God. In spite of all

that is uncertain and unknown, they follow Christ in a grueling upward climb, and God meets them in their exhaustion and their worry and their bungling attempts to construct some kind of sanctuary from the mounting troubles. And so it can be for us. God still meets us in the upward climb and the downhill slog. God still meets us in our exhaustion, our worry, our loneliness, our bungling humanity, our doubts and fears.

And that is what makes this story so meaningful. I entitled the sermon today “Not every mountaintop view gives vision.” They go down that mountain with no more clarity about Jesus’ mission or the difficult teachings he’s been offering. They still don’t see the grand plan. They’re not there yet. But they do go down the mountain with an awareness that God is in this. They’re not given answers. They’re given presence. And so it is for us, the vast majority of the time.

It’s interesting to me that what terrifies them isn’t what they see. It’s what they hear. This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

Peter doesn’t want to listen. He wants to stay there where things are bright and peaceful; where there’s a holiness to the place that takes the edge off. King Duncan has an interesting perspective on this. He writes, “This is the primary reason why many people never realize all the blessings God wants to give them. They’re too comfortable where they are. We have an expression for it, “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it.” However, sometimes it is broke, but we don’t want to admit it. Sometimes we want to stay where we are—even when where we are is not all that great, because the effort to change wears us out just thinking about it.

“Some of us are like Lucy in an old “Peanuts” cartoon, who announces to Linus, “Boy, do I feel crabby.”

“Linus tries to help her feel better. He fixes her a sandwich, pulls off her shoes, and turns on her favorite TV program. Once she settled, he asks, “Now, is there anything else I can get you? Is there anything I haven’t thought of?”

“Lucy replies, “Yes, there’s one thing that you haven’t thought of. I DON’T WANNA FEEL BETTER!” [4 ¶s from “A New Attitude” by King Duncan, www.Sermons.com.]

Peter doesn’t want to listen. He doesn’t want to face what he’s hearing about. He doesn’t want to be better. Maybe he’s not sure he can be the rock on which God builds. Maybe he’s terrified of what’s being asked of him. But Jesus touches each of those disciples. “Don’t be afraid,” he says to them.

Now let me make a confession to you. This past year and a half, I’ve been engaged in a 3-year course called Creating a Culture of Renewal. I’ve mentioned it several times in my sermons because the stuff we’re learning is impactful. It’s about leading visioning. And the coursework tells us that there are five components to Jesus-size vision. I’m going to put them on the screen for you:

- 1) The vision expands assumptions about what possible.
- 2) The vision is bigger than you are
- 3) The vision is about the flourishing of the Kingdom rather than the survival of the Institution.
- 4) The vision inspires and unifies.

And here’s the kicker:

- 5) The vision scares the heck out of you! [5 points from Rebekah Simon-Peter in “Creating a Culture of Renewal”, Track 2 Workbook (4th Edition), Ch. 6, pg. 113.]

So why does Jesus tell them “don’t be afraid”? I can only conclude that maybe he’s speaking to that debilitating fear – the kind that wants to lock down in place and not move. Which is good if there’s an active shooter, but won’t work for dreaming big.

Not every mountaintop view gives vision. Sometimes we have to go back down the mountain in order to find the answers we’re looking for; the calling on our life. The transfiguration reminds us

that God is a God of transformative power and life-giving renewal. We see the light in Christ's face. We experience the verging of history. We hear the voice of God. And the clouds move in, and the light fades, and the clamor of the valley, with all its failures, argument, division, and rejections, threatens to dull our senses to the reality of God's ongoing presence. But Jesus is still the Messiah, the son of the Living God. And Peter is still the rock that will stand against the gates of Hades. And you and I, in all our humanness, are still God's channel for the flourishing of the Kingdom. And we carry hope and terror in roughly equal portions vying in our gut. That's how it works. But God goes with us down the mountain. He is still the source of our light, the hope of lives; the energy behind our work.

So I'll close with the story of Sister John from the best-selling novel by Mark Salzman entitled *Lying Awake*. "Sister John, a cloistered nun, is slowly drawn into the intimate presence of God through stunning, dazzling, disintegrating visions. An ordinary woman becomes a quivering mystic, disappearing into "pure awareness."

Salzman writes, "she became an ember carried upward by the heat of the invisible flame... until the vacuum sucked the feeble light out of her. A darkness so pure it glistened, then out of the darkness... nova.... More luminous than any sun... all that was her ceased to exist. Only what was God remained." (pg 5-6.)

"Unfortunately for Sister John, there is a complication. Her visions come coupled with excruciating headaches, which demolish her for days at a time, making her unavailable for the work of the cloister and causing her to be a great burden to the other nuns. Finally, a doctor diagnoses her with a rare condition that will get worse unless she chooses an operation - an operation that will relieve the pain, but most likely destroy the visions. What should she do? After an intense wrestling match, Sister John chooses the operation. Why? With great reluctance, she denies herself, for the health and well-being of the larger, convent community. And sure enough, the debilitating pain disappears. But so, too, does the exquisite passion - those intimate, ecstatic encounters with God. She goes back to the ordered, plodding life of the community where she is but one of many, serving God in the mundane moments of daily discipleship.

In a final moment of wisdom in the book, the Mother Superior offers Sister John words that sustain her after the mountaintop moments have disappeared, when her daily faith journey seems dull and tentative as it's lived out in the valley: "We stretch out our emptied hands to take hold of the Light. We may feel that our prayers are arid, or that God has abandoned us. Although we suffer deeply, those become our most precious hours, transfigured into pure grace, because only in complete darkness do we learn that faith gives off light." [4 ¶s adapted from Mark Salzman, *Lying Awake* (New York: Knopf, 2000), pg. 177-178; as adapted from "Visions and Voices" by Susan R. Andrews, www.Sermons.com.]

Susan Andrews concludes, "In the long run, it is not the dazzling moments of transfiguration that connect us to God. It is the slow plodding - through the daily trenches of faithfulness that truly connect us to God. Our gospel story today ends with a very human Jesus - the glow completely gone. Once more he stands alone, his feet still dusty, his eyes still tired. Gently he touches the disciples and encourages them to rise up. The Greek word here is "resurrection." Yes, Jesus gently resurrects the disciples this side of the grave, so that they can travel with him down into the valley - down into the reality of the way things really are. Jesus resurrects us this side of the grave, so that together with God's low, steady wattage simmering quietly within us, we can live our calling." [from "Visions and Voices" by Susan R. Andrews, www.Sermons.com.] Not every mountaintop view gives us vision. No, God is the source of vision. And God goes with us into the relentless plodding of faith. And the Kingdom flourishes. Amen.