

**Scripture Lesson:** Matthew 17:1-9

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 17-18

<sup>1</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup>And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. <sup>3</sup>Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, “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.” <sup>5</sup>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!” <sup>6</sup>When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. <sup>7</sup>But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” <sup>8</sup>And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. <sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

**Response to the Word**

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

**All: Thanks be to God!**

Matthew 17:1-9

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“Overcome By Fear”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“In his book *Day By Day*, Charles Swindoll tells the story of a mysterious event that occurred many years ago to a group of youth from the church he pastored in Southern California. They were on a mountain climbing excursion, along with their youth leader. While taking in the breathtaking sights, the leader realized he had lost the trail. A heavy snowfall had completely covered the path, and he didn’t have a clue where they were or how they could get back to the main camp. Sundown was not far away, and they were not equipped to spend the night on the craggy windblown slopes where the temperature would soon drop even lower.

“While trudging through the snow, entertaining thoughts just this side of panic, they suddenly heard someone on the slopes above them yell: “Hey the trail is up here!” They glanced up and to their relief saw another climber in the distance. Without hesitation, they made their way up to the large boulder where the man was sitting. The climb exhausted them, but their relief in finding the way gave their adrenaline a rush.

“Finally they arrived... but to their surprise the man who had yelled at them was nowhere to be found. Furthermore, there didn’t seem to be any traces in the snow that anyone had been sitting on the boulder or walking around it. The trail, however, stretched out before them, leading them to safety. To this day, they do not know the identity of this stranger who helped them—maybe an angel, maybe a mortal, but Swindoll concludes the story by noting that mysterious things happen on mountains. [3 ¶s from Charles Swindoll, *Day By Day* (Nashville, TN:W Publishing Group, 2000), p. 216; as adapted here from “Come with Me to the Mountain” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

That much, I think, is true. Mysterious things happen on mountains. The weather is different. The air is different. Even the view is spectacularly different. Mysterious things happen on mountains, and the people who experience those things are never quite the same. That was certainly true for Peter, James, and John. They went up the mountain with Jesus, and mysterious things happened. The

text tells us that Jesus was ‘transfigured’. The Greek word there that is translated into English as ‘transfigured’ is *metamorphoomai* – to undergo metamorphosis – you know, like a caterpillar or a tadpole. Jesus’ true nature is revealed. His appearance changes. Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, appear with Jesus. If the disciples heard that conversation, it’s not recorded here in Matthew, so we can only guess as to what they discuss. Peter gets his brilliant idea for a retreat center, God speaks in a cloud around them, and they are overcome with fear.

And it’s no wonder, given everything they’ve been through. Let’s talk for a minute about Peter. Not that James and John don’t matter – they do – but Simon Peter, in particular, has had quite a week. If you go back and look at chapter 16 of Matthew’s gospel, we discover that Jesus has been dealing with all kinds of criticism from the scribes and the pharisees, and so he and the disciples wander around 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 who he is. 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.

There are three great name changes in scripture. Jacob (meaning usurper) wrestles with God at Peniel and is renamed Israel, meaning “one who strives with God”, from which his twelve sons and their descendants take their name. Then there’s good old Saul, whose name means “Prayed For”, or one who is an answer to prayer – talk about arrogant! Anyway, he gets knocked off his horse while heading to Damascus to persecute followers of Jesus, and is renamed Paul, meaning small or humble, so that Jesus can become the biggest thing in his life and he can live into his calling as the greatest evangelist in human history. And then there’s Simon, whose name means “He Hears”, who is given the name Peter, the Rock on which Jesus will build the church. Those are big shoes to fill.

And 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? What’s the mood like? Is Peter feeling very “rock”-like? Or is he bewildered? Exhausted? He and his friends are fishermen. And yet, they’ve 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.

Here, for a few moments outside of time, Peter encounters what is bigger than he is. Having studied scripture, he knows he’s encountering God. But here is a lesson he doesn’t need to study. He

sees it live before his very eyes. He kicks off his sandals on holy ground and drops to his knees because that's what you do if you see God and live to tell about it.

And I appreciate that about Peter. Too many of us resist a sense of awe or of being wowed. We grow out of that childlike wonder. Maybe it's because it's a humbling thing, after all, to witness the glory of God. Maybe we just get desensitized to it. Too many of us have grown up believing that being a disciple of Jesus is something we study – an intellectual pursuit, a rational path. And I'll be the last one to knock the importance of learning about Jesus and his life and teaching. "We can appreciate his acumen, his stories, his sacrificial gift. But," writes Lori Wagner, "until we allow Jesus into our hearts in a transformative kind of way, we will not experience the kind of transformative shift in our perspective that will serve as a life-altering moment.

"John Wesley, the founder of Methodism understood this better than anyone. John had been a social advocate, a sincere loyalist to God, a disciplined disciple, and an Oxford professor of theology. But he knew something was missing. Until his encounter at Aldersgate, where his "heart was strangely warmed" and he experienced the touch of God on his spirit, his emotions, his deepest self, his faith remained an intellectual endeavor. Only after his "spiritual awakening" did the movement called Methodism take off. [2 ¶s adapted from "That Mountaintop Moment" by Lori Wagner, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

When we open ourselves to be awed, touched, encountered by the living Christ, there is a transformative energy that moves inside of us; that shifts our perspective; that connects us to one another. Peter and James and John – they didn't get it immediately. We forget that they don't yet know the whole story. And yet, they follow. They watch. They learn. Their hearts are tilled for a harvest they don't yet understand. 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 lesson so meaningful. We study it, year after year, as the season of epiphany culminates and the season of Lent lays close at hand, because it reminds us of who Jesus is. God made flesh. Light in our world. Light within us. Companion on the journey – the whole journey. We study it to remember that 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.

It's interesting to me that what terrifies them isn't what they see. It's what they hear. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him 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. He doesn't want to hear about the death and the hardship that's coming. He doesn't want to wrestle with what that may mean. Maybe he doesn't want to have to be the rock on which Jesus builds his church. That's a heavy lift for one who, at first glance, only seems to open his mouth to change feet. All that is speculation, on my part. I don't know for certain. But I know the lesson tells us that Peter, James, and John are overcome with fear. Overcome. Overwhelmed. Incapacitated. Dumbfounded. Beaten down. Trounced. That's what overcome means. Until Jesus touches them. Until Jesus encourages them to get up. I don't know why that's translated as it is. The Greek word there is resurrection. Susan Andrews explains, "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](http://www.Sermons.com).]

In May of 1953, a New Zealand beekeeper named Edmund Hillary and a Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay, became the first people in recorded history ever to reach the summit of Mt. Everest. The world was captivated by the accomplishment. "Edmund Hillary became an overnight celebrity. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth. His name became a household word. Think Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods. He became a spokesperson for Sears-Roebuck. His name appeared on sleeping bags, tents, and boot laces. And he could have lived for the rest of his life in his little shrine of success. But he didn't! Instead, he went back to Nepal, back to the Sherpas, whom he had grown to know, to respect, to love.

In a speech in the mid-1990s, Hillary recounted how an elderly Sherpa ... had come to him a few years after that expedition and said, "Our children lack education. They are not prepared for the future. What we need more than anything is a school in Khumjung." So Hillary established the Himalayan Trust, and in 1961 a three-room schoolhouse was built in Khumjung. In all, the trust has built 27 schools, two hospitals and 12 medical clinics, plus numerous bridges and airfields. In more recent years, the trust has expanded its scope, devoting considerable funds to rebuilding monasteries, coping with climate change, and reforesting valleys and slopes in the region. Sir Edmund Hillary had his mountaintop experience. And it moved him to a life of mission. [2 ¶s adapted from Don George, "A Man to Match His Mountain," [http://www.salon.com/bc/1998/12/cov\\_01bc.html](http://www.salon.com/bc/1998/12/cov_01bc.html); as used in "A New Attitude" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Strange things happen on the mountaintop. But they nearly always lead us to the path back down. 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. Difficult days are coming. I have no answers for how they'll unfold. But if I'm reading this right, we'll navigate what comes through love and compassionate service and faith that we don't face them alone. God goes with us down the mountain. He is still the source of our light, the hope of lives; the energy behind our work. Thanks be to God. Amen.