

Matthew 17:1-9

“What Happens on the Mountain”

I led a retreat for a Presbyterian Women’s group this weekend in Hendersonville. I always start our time together by asking the participants to make a covenant that what is shared in the way of personal experience will not be shared when the retreat is over. In other words, if Mary tells a story about some difficult time in her life, this should be a safe place for her to share it and not have to worry about hearing it in Sunday School next week. Or to paraphrase a well-known commercial, WHAT HAPPENS AT THE RETREAT STAYS AT THE RETREAT.

This is what happened in a way after Peter, James and John had witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. Let me recap. Jesus takes his three most trusted friends up on a mountain. As they watch, he is turned inside out and the divine radiance literally seems to burst forth, captivating and frightening his friends. Then Moses and Elijah show up and Peter offers to build them all a dwelling, a house, I guess so they can have a nice mountain place to spend the weekends. God interrupts Peter and instructs him to listen to His beloved son. Then everything returns to normal and Jesus basically says, “What happens on the mountain stays on the mountain.” And it is not spoken of again throughout the rest of the gospel.

So what is a preacher to say about such a mysterious encounter that offers no further explanation, no clues, no lessons, not a smidgen of insight? Jesus even tells his disciples not to talk about it! So should we?

Well, after many years of dreading this particular Sunday as a preacher, the Lord gave me a new understanding of the whole ordeal and I’d like to flesh that out with you this morning. Matthew places this story in his gospel immediately after Jesus has told the disciples that he was

going to be handed over to the scribes and the Pharisee and be killed. Peter, in his usual fashion of speaking before he thinks, blurts out, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you” to which Jesus replies, “Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And of course, Jesus was right. Peter was looking at the human side of Jesus. He was picturing in his mind the times that they ate together and laughed together after a long day of teaching and evangelism as they rested beside the campfire with roasted fish and wine. Peter was thinking of the friend that he went to when he wanted to complain about his mother-in-law and the ways that Jesus helped him understand that his brother Andrew’s quiet discipleship was just as effective as his own boisterous ways. And like any of us, thinking about losing a friend was just too much for Peter to bear.

And to complicate things even further, Jesus told them that all who really want to follow him will be called to take up their own cross and suffer as well. And the wheels of Peter’s mind began to turn even harder as he grasped the true cost of the discipleship. And he wondered how he could possibly accomplish something so difficult or perhaps started to worry about the disappointment that Jesus would feel because he would surely fail.

You see, I can almost hear Peter’s thoughts because they are so much like mine. Because one of my best *and* worst traits is that I am fiercely loyal and protective of those that I love. Because I am quick to speak up in defense of someone else without thinking where my comments will lead me. Because my passion sometimes overrides any wisdom that I may have as I make commitments that only a fool would make and then try to keep them or die!

And I suspect that many of you, if you had been there that day, would have been just as confused. And you would have thought to yourselves, “Jesus, what are you talking about? After

all we have seen you accomplish, the miracles and healing that we have witnessed. How can this be? And if it is true, then how can we go on?"

And so it is at this point that Jesus decides to make it clear to his closest friends that, even though he was fully human – a real man who sweated and cried and hit his hand with a hammer and got blisters on his feet, that he was fully, completely DIVINE. Jesus realized that he has given his disciples more than they could digest, that they were looking for a different ending. And he gave them some hope in the midst of their doubts and fears.

So he took them to the mountain where he was filled with a light that was brighter than any light they had ever witnessed. Then the long dead Moses and Elijah stood beside him and they saw with their own eyes a transformation that was more brilliant than anything they had ever seen. And the sorrow and the fear that was renting space in the minds of Peter and James and John was overpowered with light and life and possibility. The disciples discover that Jesus brings brilliant hope to our darkest confusion.

The collective experience must have been like watching the horror of a devastating earthquake on television as the death toll rises daily. Hour after hour you see the rubble, the people being carried out on stretchers, covered in sheets, the children who are orphans and the families who are homeless and the stray dogs roaming the cluttered streets looking for shelter. And suddenly a voice breaks through, "Over here – I think we've found something." And a little girl is pulled from the wreckage, dirty and frightened but alive, calling for her mommy. Joy in the midst of suffering. Life in the midst of death. And you come to understand, as Jesus wanted Peter and James and John to understand, that where there is suffering, you are often simply standing on Holy ground. (1)

This is an important moment for all of Jesus' followers. Because a part of being the body of Christ includes having compassion for others who are dealing with uncertain, difficult and even despairing times. The word "compassion" literally means "to suffer with." So perhaps it was part of Jesus' mission that day to prepare his followers for a life of suffering with those in the church as we find our way in the world. Henri Nouwen reminds us that "the joy of being there for someone else and living in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in this human family" often leads us to a place of joy as we share each other's humanity. (2)

But then we are back to Peter. Poor well meaning, type A, goal-oriented Peter who says, "Wow! Moses and Elijah! Let's build them a church where people can flock to them for inspiration and healing and direction." And God interrupts Peter's misguided thinking and says, "STOP and LISTEN to my beloved Son!" And we are all reminded that true discipleship comes NOT in building churches but in taking up our cross.

You see because God knows the challenge that the disciples will face of living in the world without Jesus' bodily form, He wants to give them something solid to hold on to when the going gets rough. And remembering the sight of their fully human friend and leader and teacher being turned into complete radiance will help make the incarnate God more real, more available, more present when the doubts and fears return.

But friends my real "AHA!" moment came, when for the first time in my preaching career, I understood why we preach about the Transfiguration every year on the Sunday before Lent. So many people do not like the Lenten season but prefer Advent instead. After all, during Advent the lights grow brighter, the journey is to Bethlehem and we will find the newborn babe in the manger.

But those of us who observe a true Lenten season have a task in front of us in the next six weeks. Because true Lent focuses on the suffering of the last forty days that Christ spent on earth and the light grows dimmer and the journey is to Calvary and the cross. And as we get closer and closer to Holy week, some of us are tempted to ignore or dismiss or perhaps even weep because we know we cannot change the fate of our Lord. And maybe that is why we would prefer just not to observe Lent at all.

Yet that is when the Transfiguration of Jesus becomes the hope that WE can hold on to. That is when we remember that when the crosses that we are called to take up are too heavy to bear, that Jesus is NOT simply a friend or mentor or teacher. That Jesus is indeed the Savior, crucified, buried and risen. And that this Divine Christ in Jesus will not call us to bear our crosses alone.

In his book, Stories of Faith John Shea writes: “The real tragedy is not that God does not intervene but that we overlook the God who CANNOT intervene because He is already there.” This means that often, in our own suffering, we spend so much time accusing God of leaving us alone that our anguish and despair prevent us from seeing God sitting right beside us the whole time.

When we consider this, we realize that Jesus wanted Peter and James and John and you and me to witness the Transfiguration in order to affirm Jesus’ Divinity in the realest way possible. Because when we watch him suffer through his humanity for our sakes, just as his early disciples did, Lent becomes a gift, rather than a chore.

And after almost 20 years of struggling with this text, I discovered one more jewel as I reread it this week. We are told that in their fear, Jesus came and touched them. This detail is

given to us only in Matthew's account. And it brought to my mind all the times in my life when Jesus touched me at *just the moment* when I thought that my cross was too heavy to bear.

How has Jesus touched you in your fear? Was it through a person who reached out to you at just the right time with a smile, a call or an unexpected hug? Or perhaps it was through reading a verse in Scripture and understanding it for the very first time. Was it through the beauty of an anthem in church or the wisdom of a child? We all have our stories of knowing without a doubt that God is real. Here is one of my transfiguring moments.

On the morning of September **12**, 2001, I arose at my customary 6 a.m. I had been awake for some time, offering up disjointed prayers after the shock, horror and sadness of the previous day. I went through the motions of my morning routine – face, teeth, contact lenses. I even started a load of laundry before checking to be sure our children had started to rise and shine.

The news was on in the bedroom, as dismal as the night before. Picture of destruction and death filled the screen. And at that moment, I opened the blinds of our bedroom window, which faces due east. And I sucked in my breath.

Above the dark green of the tree, the sun had begun to rise. The sky was a beautiful mixture of different blues. And stretching through the blue were magnificent streaks of pink. It was as if God had taken his Crayola box and painted fingers into the sunrise, stretching out to me. It was a Holy moment. Behind me, the television, filled with pictures of human sinfulness and hate and greed. Before me, the glorious sky – a picture painted by God's love and compassion and healing. And I knew that our God was with me, with us, and would show us the way to pick up our crosses.

So it is with the story in Matthew's Gospel. I suppose in the end, Jesus wanted to remind Peter and James and John and you and me that the world's attempt to break up is not stronger

than the mission of the cross to save us. And while we cannot be shielded from the pain of this life, neither can we be shielded from the light of Eternal Life in Christ Jesus our Lord. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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(1) Maryetta Madeleine Anschutz, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, p.454.

(2) Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey, Harper San Francisco, 1997.