

# “Transfiguration”

Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration Sunday, 23 February 2020

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

Matt Matthews

Peter, James, and John climb up that mountain with Jesus. It's a little steep. Their muscles ache, but with this upward exertion comes a lightening of heavy hearts. The higher they go, the more exciting the view is. Breaks in the tree line afford views of the town below, roads running like veins, patches of gardens and farm, mostly desert. The sky reaches across the land like a shining blue bowl. Their tired muscles are tingling to life.

In the valley below, six days before, Jesus had told his disciples “If any want to become my followers, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Cross? That talk was crazy. And as Peter, James and John climb that mountain, that ridiculous talk seems, thankfully, more and more distant.

In the valley below, six days before, Jesus had told the disciples, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Death? That talk was nonsensical. As Peter, James, and John climb that twisted mountain path, blood pumps new life to tired muscles, and the brightening view of the distant sea begins to take their breath away.

Up here, Jesus will be in a better mood. The mountaintop will do him good. He'll talk about more uplifting things. No more cross. No more death. Jesus was off his game when he talked that line six days before.

\* \* \*

A mountaintop experience takes us away from life's difficulties. That's why we call it a “mountaintop” experience. We're on vacation from the daily grind. We've risen above the mundane. We've shucked things that weight us down. *Crosses. Death.* To be on a spiritual mountaintop is to catch a glimpse of heaven. On the mountaintop, you delight in things you might otherwise take for granted—the impressionistic colors of the sunset, the swaying of tree tops tugged by wind, hawks climbing and soaring on unseen thermals. The mountain is a thin place where the unfiltered beauty of heaven and earth overlap. Lost people find themselves on mountains.

Mountaintops in scripture are holy places. It was on Mount Horeb that Moses stood before the burning bush (Ex. 3). It was on Mount Sinai that Moses received the Ten Commandments (Ex 20). It was on Mount Nebo that Moses looked over and saw the promised land (Deut 30). The Psalmist compares God's righteousness to a mountain (Psalm 36). Jesus went to the mountain to preach what we now call the “sermon on the mount” (Matthew 5ff). In scripture, people find God on mountaintops.

And now, Jesus has taken Peter, James, and John to this “high mountain.”

What happens next is mind blowing. Jesus becomes transfigured in light. His clothes and face shine like the sun. Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus.

Naturally, Peter doesn't want to leave. He gets the bright idea to build three dwelling places, one for Jesus, one for Moses, one for Elijah. Peter doesn't want this glorious moment to end.

And it's true for all of us that when we experience a spiritual high, we don't want to leave. We say to each other, "Wouldn't it be great to live here?" Let's put down roots. This is how we feel about the moment in the stadium when our team wins the championship game. We don't want the feeling to end. When the doctor gives us good news after surgery, we want to bottle that feeling. When our grandchild is sleeping on our lap, we could live in that moment forever. Many of us feel that way about our happy past. Churches are famous for this: remember youth club? Remember when we were young? Remember when reverend so-and-so was our beloved pastor? We don't want to leave the mountaintop.

But we must.

We can't stay on the mountain.

We've got to come down.

The disciples heard the voice of God on that mountaintop. "This is my son, my beloved. With him I am well-pleased. Listen to him." The disciples crumpled with fear. But Jesus does three things. He touches them, tells them not to be afraid, then leads them back down. He leads them down the mountain.

The mountaintop is where we are inspired for ministry. The valley is where that ministry usually takes place. The disciples can't stay on that mountaintop because Jesus has more work to do in the valley. And he needs Peter, James, and John's help. Jesus needs our help, too.

Thank God for the mountaintop! On the mountain, we disengage from the world. We retreat. We step away. We all need the gifts of the mountaintop. God inspires us there. But Jesus leads us not only up to mountaintop-sabbath, but down to the workweek of ministry.

Peter, James, and John—all fisherman—would understand this saying: ships are safe in the harbor, but that's not what ships are for. We must set out onto open seas.

Likewise, we come down the mountain. But we come down inspired. Having caught a glimpse of God's glory, we come down renewed, reinvigorated, recharged. In the valley, disciples of every age will grapple with what Jesus means by taking our cross and following him. We will find life and death in the valley, injustice, poverty, exclusion, and a world of hurt. But we have seen the light, and the light guides our steps.

In a few moments, I'll climb down from this pulpit, and we'll climb down the stairs of this sanctuary, and we'll go out from this church building into the world with healing in our hands.

Jesus touches our shoulder.

Jesus says, "Don't be afraid."

Jesus takes our hand, and leads us out.

Matthew 17:1-9                    1Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

9As 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."