

“High Water and Other Hazards of Faith”  
A sermon by Matt Matthews  
from the front row, First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL  
Matthew 14:22-33

August 30, 2020

I've always been intrigued by this passage. In the midst of much activity, Jesus dismissed the crowds and “went up the mountain by himself to pray.” In these words, I find a pattern for spiritual living: take time out to pray. Take holy pause in the midst of a busy life. Work is balanced by rest. Time with the crowd is balance by time alone with God. The world’s noise is soothed by God’s whisper.

In the midst of much busyness, Jesus “went up the mountain by himself to pray.”

In this passage Jesus goes from full speed ahead to pause, to repose, to prayer.

Many Christian people (and people of other religions, I’m sure) think that if we were truly spiritual, if we were really faithful, we’d spend more time on the mountain in prayer. (That would be a good thing.) We’d not only disengage from the world for a little while to pray, if we were *really* spiritual, we’d pray full time and remained disengaged from the world forever. We’d forget the world in our state of wonderful, wonderful prayer.

That’s what Peter, James, and John wanted to do when they were with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration. Do you remember that story? Jesus takes these disciples up the mountain, and once there, Moses and Elijah show up. Jesus becomes transformed in white light. And Peter, James, and John get the bright idea to build booths so that they can stay there. Let’s remain here, they say. Let’s stay in this state of religious bliss.

Many of us think the same thing when we experience a religious high. *I wish I could stay here and ride this wave of wonder forever.*

But Jesus emphatically says no to that idea.

He tells his disciples on the mountain of transfiguration they can’t stay. They have work to do in the valley. Jesus didn’t come into the world to be enshrined on a mountain top with nice views; he came to serve the world. He came to meet the beggars in the alley, and the immigrants in the lines at the border, and the sick over in the hospital, and the young who feel awkward and alone in their teenage years. Jesus came to sit with the lonely; Jesus came to laugh with the prostitutes; Jesus came to make friends with fishermen and tax collectors. To redeem the world, Jesus knew he needed to get to know the world. He needed to meet the people of the world and to spend time with them. Jesus knew that he needed to know what people needed redeeming from. Jesus’s work wasn’t on a mountain or on a throne or in some state of prayer-like bliss, Jesus’ place was side by side with his people.

At this moment, I can’t remember an instance where Jesus said to somebody, “Hey, I’ll pray for you.” No, by word and deed, he befriended people and got his hands dirty by becoming involved in their lives, by being a faithful neighbor, by meeting them particularly in the sad places where boils rupture the skin, and tears streak the eyes, and hunger pangs roil through the stomach. Jesus doesn’t spend 24-7 locked in some prayer closet.

John Bell says that the goal of Christian Spirituality is to get us elbow deep into the work of the gospel by getting elbow deep in our community.

"Spirituality is not chiefly concerned with prolonging states of ecstasy, rapture, or private religious intensity" (p. 9, States of Bliss and Yearning, GIA Publications, 2002). The purpose of spirituality is to enable us to face up to things we might rather avoid.

We might get a dose of spirituality on the mountain, but our calling is not to stay there in that bliss, but to come down and share the blessing with others.

Spirituality is not our ticket out of this world, it is our truest and best invitation into this world. And that means there will be moments of bliss—but also seasons of travail.

All of our religious heroes know this.

Moses, known as a spiritual prophet, had to struggle with his guilt of being a murderer. He did not lead a life of bliss. No, he was pestered by complaining people who needed a lot of attention and who took their anxiety out on him.

David, who is said to have written the tenderest, truest psalms, struggled with his past sin, not the least of which was murder and adultery. He knew the agony of losing his first-born son.

"There is no authentic spirituality . . . there is no true devotion which emanates from a life which is constantly pleasure-filled and pain-free (p. 11) . . . The road to holiness leads through the world of action (p. 12) . . . Those who wish to know the bliss of shouting "Hallelujah" need also to know the yearning of those who cry, "How long?" (pp. 15).

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So, Jesus comes down from the mountain of prayer. He found his disciple that evening in a storm, in a boat, battered by waves, frightened. And he stepped into their topsy-turvy world bringing peace, calming the waves, gathering his wet flock to himself in his arms. God in Christ comes to us where and when we need God most . . . and God sends us, in Christ's name, to go to others in their storm to bear the love and grace which we have received.

What can be more spiritual than that?

In the name of the One who calls us up the mountain to pray, and down the mountain to serve, Jesus our Lord, AMEN.