

REFLECTIONS

February 23, 2020

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Season Jones

1 Exodus 24:12-18 • Matthew 17:1-9

Have you ever felt out of sorts? Angry? Overwhelmed? Sad? Tired of life? How do you recharge your batteries? What is your go-to? For me it is being in nature in general and specifically mountains. I've always been drawn to mountains. Growing up in the suburbs of Chicago I didn't get to experience them much firsthand. In fact, I learned how to ski on a garbage dump that reached the "right" height and was turned into a golf and ski resort. Its vertical drop is only 180 feet. To put that in perspective, Whitetail's vertical drop is 935 feet.

There are many things I love about mountains. I love the exertion of hiking, the solitude and the sights and sounds. More importantly I love how everything just is. Oh, I have a vine wrapped around me. Okay cool, I'll keep growing and one day I will be a really awesome walking stick for someone. Oh, my seed fell on a rock in the middle of a stream. Okay I'll still grow as tall as I can with my limited resources.

Then there are the lessons I've learned on mountains. I fell in love on a mountain and had to learn how to trust myself and God with the authenticity of that love. I learned that I don't know everything, and I don't need to. I learned about some interesting creatures such as boogie woogie aphids, also known by their boring name, the beech blight aphid. Look up a video of the boogie woogie aphid and learn some new dance skills. From the mountain stream I am still learning how to just let it flow no matter the perceived obstacles in the way. Most importantly I have learned that I am loved.

Exodus 24:12 says, "The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." Moses obeys and then waits for 7 days before God finally calls out to him from the cloud. Can you imagine what Moses was thinking? Was he impatient? Frustrated? Maybe he was questioning if God really did call him up the mountain? Maybe he was trusting? I mean God had already done some amazing stuff. The first time God spoke to him from the burning bush, it was on a mountain, possibly the same one. I'm thinking Moses was no fool and would be waiting with anticipation to see what God said next. Maybe God called him there and had him wait to give him the respite he needed. I mean the 5 chapters before this one God goes over all the rules and then the next 7 chapters after this one are spent going over the requirements for the Tabernacle and the priests. God probably knew Moses needed a break in between. It was like spring break. I'll give you this week off before we go for the final haul.

Then we come to Matthew 17 and here Jesus has just had the Pharisees and Sadducees demanding signs. Even his own disciples need him to explain all his teachings. It must have been exhausting to have to defend and explain himself all the time. Jesus needs to get away. Like me, his go-to is up the mountain. This time he takes Peter, James and John with him. Up they climb. Jesus is transfigured into this shining guy and starts chatting with Moses and Elijah. Now Elijah also heard God speak to him in a low whisper up on Mt. Horeb. I envy these 3 guys who heard God speak to them so clearly up on the mountain. I want that for myself and for you.

Peter sees this amazing thing and wants to worship Jesus, Moses and Elijah by making 3 Tabernacles or dwelling places. Now why would Peter want to make these dwellings? It seems almost like Peter wanted to keep the 3 of them there all to himself. I mean I would love to just

sit and listen to the 3 of them talk about God. But while Peter is still getting the words out, God intervenes and speaks from the cloud and says, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I have delighted; listen to him." The disciples get scared and fall to the ground. I would've too. God basically just told Peter, "No, you are getting the wrong message. I don't want you to build 3 tabernacles for these guys." It isn't a stretch for me to think God might not want us to just worship Jesus but instead wants us to follow Jesus' teachings. Imagine if all followers of Jesus did just that? Following his teachings includes time up on the mountain to recharge but then we also need to follow him down the mountain and get messy. Because life is messy.

I know I am always practicing loving those around me who keep trying to hurt me. I feel like my main goal here on Earth is to learn how to love a little more, a little better and a little quicker. I get a lot of practice from some of the relationships in my life.

Could it be that the disciples were also scared of their belovedness? The other time God says the words, "This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I have delighted," is just after Jesus is baptized. Then immediately in Matt Chapter 4, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be tempted. The devil or the tempter says, "If you are God's son, command that these stones become loaves of bread" and then "If you are God's son, cast yourself down," from the pinnacle.

Almost 6 years ago I was questioning if I was loved. I read these verses as I had done so many times before, but this time I had an epiphany. What if the main tests weren't if Jesus would use his power to turn stones into bread or if he would throw himself down? What if the main test was something that I struggle with? The question, "If you are God's son?" Do I believe I am God's daughter? Do you believe you are God's child? Do I believe I am loved? Do you? When I am firm in my knowing that I am child of God, that I am loved, my fear melts away.

Back to the book of Matthew. While the disciples are on the ground in fear in verse 7, Jesus touches them and says, "Arise and do not be afraid." Whenever I am thrown for a loop in this crazy life, if I can remember and rest in God's love, I also am not afraid. It's the remembering that is hard.

Jesus tells us in John 15:9 "as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you, remain in my love." It is hard to remain in the love. Was it Jesus' acceptance and recognition of God's love that transfigured him and allowed him to connect and chat with two dead guys? What would happen if we could accept God's love for us?

When I am feeling scattered, overwhelmed, tired or hurt, if I can take a moment, I always realize that I don't feel connected to God. I feel adrift, ungrounded. Like Jesus, my go-to is the mountain. I always find my way back to the ground of being out there. Sometimes I am so disconnected that I even take off my shoes and hike barefoot, which forces me to slow down and pay attention to what is in front of me. Like Jesus I come down from the mountain ready to connect with those I encounter in my life. Even if they question me or ask me to prove myself. Kelley and I hike year-round. In fact, we just hiked out near Devil's Nose yesterday. Today the high is going to be 57 degrees and sunny. I encourage you to take time to get out on a mountain and listen to what God has to say to you.

Julia Sandy
Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to

them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then 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." While 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!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 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."

I should start by saying this isn't the first time Ethel has asked me to speak. The first time was a few years ago but I was out of town on the needed date. The second time was last spring, when my family was in the middle of battling my father's very acute – yet very extended – medical problems. Where we – my sister, brother, mother, and myself – were losing him both physically and mentally.

To Ethel's email I sent back a very short and terse reply which said, simply, "I'm not speaking to God right now."

When I was again asked a few weeks ago, I thought I probably shouldn't deny Ethel a third time so, here I am. I'm so glad I said yes, because this is a wonderful part of scripture to think about and I've certainly come to appreciate it in a new way.

As I started to prepare I did what I always do on matters scriptural and spiritual – I called my dad. I'm happy to report that he's still with us both physically and mentally, and so I asked him for help, for insight, into today's scripture. Much of what has gone into this reflection is based upon conversations I had with him.

This story is, of course, the transfiguration, one of the miracles that Jesus doesn't perform but that, instead, happens to him. And like his baptism, within this miracle the voice of God is heard, identifying Jesus as his son, in whom he is pleased.

As I thought and read more about this story, it was the ending and aftermath of the event that interested me more than the actual transfiguration. This is not to minimize the transfiguration, itself, which is the fulfillment of law and prophecies, and confirms for the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus' divinity is made manifest in the transfiguration, and through it he is transformed. He will carry that transformation with him into his death and resurrection. This story of transfiguration is one we can turn to, and is one that many people do rely on for insights about their own transformations.

But I've always been more interested in the man, the non-divine Jesus, the one who struggled with understanding who he was and still kept walking forward. So, when I read this story for today, I kept coming back, not to the divine Jesus, but to two things, both of which happen at the end. One is that Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to not tell anyone yet about what they saw, and the other is the necessity of going back down the mountain.

This isn't the first time in Matthew that Jesus warns people not to speak, either of the miracles they witness or the truth that he is the Messiah. When he heals the leper, and two blind men, and even the multitudes, he says, repeatedly, "tell no one." In Matthew 16 he commands his disciples to "tell no one that he is Jesus the Christ." Why? Why can't they tell anyone? Why do they have to wait?

One reason is probably that when word does get out about Jesus' teachings and miraculous deeds, it is usually misunderstood or gets him into trouble. When he casts demons out of possessed men and into a herd of swine – and then those swine perish by running off a cliff – Jesus is “begged to depart from that region.” When he told the paralytic man to “arise for his sins were forgiven,” the scribes called Jesus blasphemous. When he healed a mute, the Pharisees said he cast out demons because he was the *ruler* of demons. It is understandable, then that Jesus would ask Peter, James, and John to “tell no one.”

But as I think about that command I see another reason. Jesus is asking these three close and trusted companions to pause and reflect, to let the weight of what they've seen have time to sink in. When they first see Jesus with Elijah and Moses, Peter can't help himself – he has to say something. In the Gospel of Mark, this part of the transfiguration reads:

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

I can relate to this Peter. I've been this Peter. Confronted with something that confuses and frightens him, he just starts talking. He feels compelled to speak as a way to process his terror, to gather himself. Maybe even as a way to react so he can distract himself from *having* to process what has happened or think about this terrifying unknown he's become a part of.

Jesus' asking his companions to “tell no one,” was a call to them to keep silent, I think, because in that silence is a way of knowing that can be cheapened by speech. While these three men already knew Jesus to be the Messiah, they just had that affirmed by the voice of God. The voice of God. What words could do that justice? What words were needed? What words could explain to anyone else what had happened?

In the novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Nikos Kazantzakis writes of the transfiguration as a vision seen by a rabbi who has traveled to meet with Jesus. As the disciples and Mary Magdalene leave the two men to talk they, instead, sat up the night without speaking a word. Kazantzakis writes, “They both understood perfectly that words can never empty and relieve the heart of man. Only silence can do that, and they kept silent.” How different from our current “comment” culture, where everyone feels compelled to offer opinions about everything, all of the time, and to measure worth by likes.

Jesus' request that they “tell no one” also reminds me of the birth of Jesus. In all of the Gospels we are told the angels and shepherds proclaimed his coming throughout the land but that Mary, instead, hid these things in her heart and treasured them. Jesus is asking Peter, James, and John to treasure, to mull and absorb, and not comment. That is difficult to do, it's at least not something I'm usually very good at. But as soon as we begin talking we've staked out territory, we've boxed ourselves in, we've captured possibilities but we've also excluded some. If in the transformations we undergo and those we witness we, instead, wait, we might come upon a new way of thinking about them. We might even realize that there are some experiences, some profound transformations, that we will never be able to speak. Especially if we are talking about someone else's transformation, someone else's divinity.

Put another way, Alex McNeill, the Executive Director of More Light Presbyterians, explains, “Resistance is sitting with an experience of the unknown, of the holy, of the unspeakable, and not rushing to try and explain it away. To let it be a powerful thing that may be beyond words. . . . Resistance is to allow those experiences to take root in a deeper place than language.”

The second thing that sticks with me from this scripture is that they had to go back down the mountain. Jesus had just been transfigured, Peter, James, and John had just heard the voice of God – Peter wanted to stay and build dwellings – and yet they still had to go back down the mountain. I don't picture a slow stroll but, rather, a hastening, a rush down the mountain. There was work to be done, and everyone knew that time was running out.

They couldn't live on the mountain, one can't emotionally exist in that place very long and it isn't where the work is. Jesus still had more people to heal and minister to, multitudes to teach, and tables to overturn in the temple. The crucifixion and resurrection awaited him, too. Peter, James, and John also had work to do that would stretch out over the course of their lives.

And, of course, eventually Peter, James, and John did tell people, which is how the story was written into scripture. I find it interesting, though, that the transfiguration is recounted in every gospel except the gospel of John. John was actually there, yet he doesn't include it in his story. In John's gospel, it is the entire life of Jesus that is the transfiguration. It's a longer view of how change and meaning happen, and for most of us, that is how it works. We might get a mountain top experience – maybe – but even if we do, we certainly can't stay there.

The story of the transfiguration reminds me that transformations are often terrifying, and some even stop us from speaking to God, but that silence can be a needed response to witnessing the divine. That, and having much work to do down in the valley.

Amen.