



“Up on the Mountain”
Scripture – Matthew 17:1-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 23, 2020

Preaching poses a twofold challenge. First, you put on your archaeologist hat and pretend to be Indiana Jones deciphering an encoded message from the ancients. Once you discover the meaning the passage had in its original context, you attempt to apply that meaning to our lives in 21st Century North America. Depending on the message, it requires you to reach for a variety of other hats – theologian, prophet, evangelist, sociologist, psychologist, poet and more.

If all goes well – and by that I mean that God’s Spirit is sparking something in both me and in you – we hear God’s word for us today. It goes without saying that some passages lend themselves to *interpretation* and *application* better than others. I regret to inform you that today’s passage is not one of them.

Although this story of the Transfiguration of Jesus pops up in the lectionary every single year on the Sunday prior to the beginning of Lent, many preachers sidestep this passage and search for another. I am here to confess that I am among those who usually go fishing!

When I approached today’s gospel reading, I was fully aware that I had often skipped it in the past. However, even I was surprised to discover just how many times I had either dodged it, or cunningly designed the preaching schedule so that our Associate Pastor would be stuck with it! In the previous 15 years I have preached on this passage exactly once. Let that stand as a clear expression of my fondness for it!

Barbara Brown Taylor is considered one of the foremost interpreters of Scripture living today. Here is what she says about the Transfiguration of Jesus. “The story defies interpretation, although that has not stopped legions of interpreters from trying.” Well, sit back and relax because today it is your privilege to hear one more fool take a stab at it.

Our portrait of God is forever lacking and will never be complete; like a painting that an artist has begun but not yet finished. There are many brush strokes and some definite features have emerged, but the canvas still has blank areas that are pleading for more. The Scriptures provide the paint palette with vibrant colors and coax the artist forward with visions. However, the work of art remains incomplete because God is far more than can be expressed with brush strokes or words.

Thanks be to God we are not completely in the dark because the Scriptures provide us with images and metaphors. They inform us that God is like a king, a shepherd, a potter, a judge, a farmer, a vineyard owner, a father who had two sons, a mother who comforts her child. God is like a lion, an eagle, a rock, the wind. There are a number of

identifiers that help us gain a picture of God, but the multiplicity of images shouts that every portrait of God we attempt to paint is deficient. God is always more than we mere mortals can express.

This is similar to the quandary the gospel writers faced when they attempted to depict the experience of Peter, James and John in today's scripture reading. They were attempting to describe a moment that defied description. They were attempting to capture a mystifying moment that broke the bounds of normal experience.

When we study a passage of Scripture, it is not always necessary to have read the passage that precedes it. Like watching a TV show that has multiple seasons and episodes, it helps to know what took place in the previous segment, but it is not always critical to understanding the current scene. However, sometimes, we struggle to grasp what we're watching because we missed what has come previously. That is the case with this morning's passage.

It's critical to know that six days prior to Jesus rounding up Peter, James, and John to trek up the mountain with him, Jesus had queried the disciples. "Who do people say that I am?"

Peter had the winning reply: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." But while Peter is doing an end zone dance and spiking the ball, Jesus tells the disciples what it means: a dark future looms. He must turn his face to Jerusalem to confront the religious and political leaders and that will result in great suffering and death.

As if that were not sobering enough, he adds that anyone who wants to be his follower must deny himself and take up his cross. It was a blow the disciples had not seen coming and it left them questioning whether they should continue their journey with Jesus.

A mere six days after this depressing news, Jesus led Peter, James, and John up a grueling mountain path; presumably to pray. But when they reach the top, things go sideways. Jesus begins to shine like the sun. It is not as if he is reflecting brilliant sunlight, it is more like the sun is shining from within him, streaming out of his skin. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

While the disciples stand frozen, trying to comprehend what they are seeing, two figures appear and they, too, are illuminated. One is Moses; the other is Elijah. Two men who had been dead for centuries standing near Jesus and conversing with him. Struggling to fathom this surreal moment, Peter suggests they do something manly. He blurts out, "Let's build something! How about a dwelling for each of you?"

Some commentators interpret Peter's action to mean that he was attempting to hang on to this mountaintop spiritual experience so that it did not pass too quickly. That may be the case, but I wonder if Peter was trying to nail down this mysterious, metaphysical moment; nail it down to the hard rock of the mountain with the hope of making it more concrete.

Jesus does not respond to his suggestion and, while Peter is babbling, a cloud envelops them. A booming voice emanates from the center of the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

The disciples get wobbly; the hair on the back of their necks stands up and they drop to the ground in terror. But Jesus walks over to them, touches them, and says, "Get up and do not be afraid." They manage to stand up, and when they do, all has returned to normal. The cloud has vanished, Jesus appears natural, and it is just the four of them. Jesus begins to lead them back down the series of switchbacks on the steep mountain and, as they descend, he gives the disciples a wise piece of advice: "Don't breathe a word of what you've seen."

If you have ever experienced something on the order of this mountaintop experience – perhaps you had a vision of a loved one who had died or heard a voice that you believed was God or saw a sign that told you what you

needed to do, be careful who you share that with. Otherwise you may find a message in your Inbox with the name and number of a good psychiatrist. Most of us have been taught to interpret every experience in terms of a modern, rational, scientific mindset. However, when we do, we ignore the mystery and wonder that also comprises the world.

Further, we have been taught to equate truth with historical facts. However, religious truth—similar to poetry and music— adds another dimension. Looking at an experience rationally and analytically, gives us the height and width of reality, but spiritual insight can add depth. It can move us beyond the “what” of life to the “why” of life.

Some of our most powerful moments in life may be the most difficult to explain. Maybe you have stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon and been overwhelmed with a feeling of awe at the grandeur of God’s creation. Perhaps a piece of music struck chords deep within you affecting you in ways that words simply cannot express. You might have served soup to people who were hungry and then sat down and chatted with someone who was homeless and your heart ached when you heard his story and your vision cleared long enough to glimpse that he was not really some stranger, but rather your brother.

Why do you suppose Jesus led the disciples to the mountaintop where they could peek behind the curtain and see Jesus in all his radiant glory? I think it was because once they walked back down the mountain, they would face the most difficult days of their lives. The march to Jerusalem would lead to an ugly encounter with darkness and death, and the disciples would need something to hold onto to endure. They would need a vision of the risen Christ shining in all of his glory.

In three days it will be Ash Wednesday, the evening when we put ashes on our foreheads in the shape of a cross and hear the traditional – and somber – words “From dust you have come and to dust you shall return.” We will begin the journey of Lent which more often reminds us of the darkness in our world than the light. But do not allow the darkness to drag you under. Do not let it defeat you. Remember: ours is an Easter faith, and in the end the radiant light of God wins.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

God of radiant light, when we come to you in prayer our first word is gratefulness. We are deeply thankful for your precious gift of life, for the wonders of the universe, for the wisdom of Scripture, for deep friendships, and for the challenges to spread your kingdom of peace.

Gracious God, inspire us to pursue the extraordinary adventure you urge us to live; one that will instill in us a greater purpose and inject us with joy.

May we find the will

to forgive those who have wronged us,
to master our wealth and not to be mastered by it,
to share the burden of one who is in pain,
to act with humility;
to visit those who long for human companionship,
to nurture a generous spirit.

Loving God, there are some within our church family who are struggling. Storms have struck, their lives are in upheaval and the future is bleak. Life has lost all luster, their dreams have evaporated, and the light of hope is but a flicker.

God of compassion, Fellow Sufferer who feels the pain of the world, grant them

courage to face their fears,
strength to endure their trials,
and the will to fight against the darkness.

As they trudge the valleys that threaten to engulf them, give them eyes to see the stars that still shine above the mountains and the certain knowledge that you will show them the path to a better day.

Everlasting God, help all of us to deepen our trust in your guidance so that we may pursue the friendship, satisfy the need, heal the wound and lift the spirit of someone who has lost hope. Grant us the courage to risk embarking on the adventure you yearn for us to take.

Now, hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.