



**"A Bit Like Heaven"**  
**Scripture – Luke 9:28-43a**  
**Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, February 27, 2022**

In her book *Grounded*, Diana Butler Bass tells of a monastery located in the hills outside Santa Barbara, California. The scholar of religious history used to visit this sacred site often to take in the sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean. High above the city, Mount Calvary was a peaceful place — a place set apart. "There were distant sounds," Bass writes, "... voices traveling across the canyons or the faint rumble of the freeway far below, like indistinct prayers rising to the skies. Mostly it was quiet — stunningly so — the immediate silence broken mostly by birdsong, bells, or monastic chant. So high up, that otherworldly place felt *a bit like heaven*.<sup>1</sup>" I can understand the appeal of a place like Mount Calvary. It's the kind of escape many of us long for after weeks like this one, when the world seems to be falling apart. It would be nice to retreat to that mountaintop — to take in stunning vistas and let birdsong drown out the urgent chatter of the 24-hour news cycle. It would be nice to get away — to dwell in the presence of the holy, to bask in the goodness of God's grace. Yes, it would be nice to ascend to a sacred site so high above the din of the world that it feels a bit like heaven.

Perhaps *this* is the reason that Peter offers to set-up camp in today's reading from the Gospel of Luke. Along with James and John, Peter has accompanied Jesus to the mountaintop, so that their Lord might spend time in prayer. The four have left behind the clamoring crowds — the constant cries for healing and help — and come to a place set apart. What follows is an encounter with the divine unlike anything the disciples could have imagined. While he is praying, Jesus' face begins to shine like the sun; his clothes become dazzling white. And that's not all! Two giants of the faith — Moses and Elijah — appear beside Jesus, awash in glory. It is a mysterious moment, a holy moment, a *literal* mountain-top moment. Peter's instinct is to stay — to pitch a tent and rest in God's presence. *Master*, he says, *it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*.

We can't know what Peter has in mind — whether he intends to stay for an afternoon or a week or forever. I doubt this ever-eager disciple even has a plan. After all, Luke reports: "[Peter] did not know what he was saying" (NIV). But his longing makes sense to me ... Peter has been following Jesus for some time; he has come face-to-face with the suffering of the world — demons relegated to

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 2 (emphasis added).

graveyards, paralytics confined to mats. Peter has heard Jesus speak of the cross that looms in the distance, of the pain that awaits the Messiah. And, now, he has been given a glimpse of God's glory. He has been lifted into heaven. And Peter wouldn't mind stretching out this moment; he wouldn't mind staying on the mountaintop, far removed from the pleas and perils of the world below. But that is not to be.

While Peter is speaking, a cloud overshadows the group and a voice thunders from heaven: *This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!* And, then — suddenly — the moment is over. Moses and Elijah disappear. Jesus is left alone, his face and clothes no longer radiating God's glory, but coated — as before — with the dust of the journey. Whatever God's Chosen One says next, it seems to have included a command to pack up their things and leave this bit of heaven behind. For — next thing we know — Jesus and his disciples are at the base of the mountain, surrounded once again by the clamoring crowd. They've returned to reality — the mystery of the mountaintop now mere memory.

That mountaintop paradise Diana Butler Bass describes is merely memory, also. In 2008, "the California winds blew hot, and a wildfire destroyed [the original Mount Calvary Monastery.] As the flames engulfed their home, the terrified monks fled downhill to the city" to take refuge with the sisters of St. Mary's Convent. These sisters resided in a place altogether different than that mountain retreat; their home was in a bustling neighborhood, right behind the Santa Barbara Mission. Bass describes it this way:

*This is a contemplative place. But, oddly enough, it is not terribly quiet. Across the creek, schoolchildren play, cheering for their teams. Not far away, someone stands in back of a building talking on her cell phone ... [The sound of traffic is muffled by] trees and shrubs but still obvious. Joggers on the road chat with one another during their morning run ... Neighborhood gardeners mow lawns and blow leaves.<sup>2</sup>*

The ambient noise of a neighborhood must have sounded like a cacophony to monks accustomed to birdsong and bells. But this is the soundscape they've chosen. After discerning what to do with the insurance money, the monks decided to sell the scorched site atop the hill and find a new home. The sisters only had a few women remaining in their community, so they offered their property to the brothers. Thus, St. Mary's Convent became the new Mount Calvary Monastery. In the end, the brothers gave up that otherworldly place that felt a bit like heaven in favor of the world. They chose to dwell in the city, living their life among harried parents and stressed-out executives and bus drivers struggling to make ends meet. In the end, the monks chose to trade in birdsong and bells for the laughter of schoolchildren and the shriek of an ambulance, to come face-to-face with the realities of life, in all its sorrow and all its joy. They chose to come down from the mountain.

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As soon as Jesus returns from the mountain where he was transfigured before Peter and James and John, he is confronted with the realities of life. A man in the crowd cries out, begging Jesus to look upon his son who is possessed by a demon. Suddenly, the spirit will seize the boy's body — transfiguring the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2.

appearance of his face, as the child shrieks and foams at the mouth. "I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not," the father pleads.

But Jesus — Jesus — has the power to liberate the boy. Not only have we seen him do this before, but freeing people from the things that bind is what his ministry is all about. Jesus, himself, declared this when he read from the Prophet Isaiah in Nazareth: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free*. What's more — Luke has just reminded us of Christ's purpose in the scene atop the mountain. While Matthew, Mark and Luke all recount the Transfiguration of Jesus, Luke alone records the conversation between Jesus and Moses and Elijah. *They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem*, Luke tells us. *They ... were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem*. On one level, Moses and Elijah are speaking of Jesus' death. But the word they use is interesting. It's a word you've heard before, even though it appears only once in the entire New Testament.<sup>3</sup> In Greek it's *exodon* — Exodus. *Moses and Elijah were speaking of his [Exodus]*. And, in using that word, Luke evokes the story of Israel's Exodus — how God liberated the Hebrew People from slavery and led them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

With that image fresh in the minds of readers, Luke leads us down the mountain, where we witness the crowd pressing in on Jesus. This is what awaits him at the bottom of the mountain. This is always what awaits him. But Jesus does not look away; he does not retreat to the mountaintop to set up camp. Instead, in faithfulness to his mission, the One whom God bathed in glory allows God's light to shine through him. Jesus casts out an unclean spirit, releasing a young boy from that which holds him captive, setting him free from suffering and fear. And, as the boy is transformed before their very eyes, those watching behold God's glory and grace. As Luke tells us, all are *astounded at the greatness of God*.

As followers of Jesus — as disciples who have beheld God's glory in the transfigured face of Christ — we cannot turn our faces from the suffering of this world. Even when it is tempting to pitch a tent in God's presence and camp out on the mountain, we cannot hide away from the realities of the world. Rather, like Jesus, we are called to look upon the suffering we see; we are called to participate in Christ's liberating work.

This week *The New York Times* published an opinion piece called, "We Must Learn to Look at Grief, Even When We Want to Run Away."<sup>4</sup> It was written by a physician who has seen far more than her fair share of suffering over the past two years. She suggests her work in palliative medicine offers all of us a way to grapple with what has happened during this pandemic and to move forward together. When working with families in the throes of grief, Dr. Puri has learned the importance of bearing witness. "It's natural and perhaps instinctive to want to look away from mortality, to deny its existence or banish it to a shadow world," she writes. But "witnessing requires seeing another's pain as no different from our own." So — as a witness — she has learned to look, even when she wanted to look away. She's stayed and listened. She's dwelled with grieving loved ones in the midst of uncertainty. She's sat with soon-to-be widows, looking at photos that tell the story of a life being stolen away. And she's concluded this is a

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Henrich, "Commentary on Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)," [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Sunita Puri, "We Must Learn to Look at Grief, Even When We Want to Run Away," *The New York Times* (February 23, 2022).

role we all can play, we all *must* play. "We cannot simply be those who grieve and those who look away. To help one another, each of us must reach out, express condolences, write cards and offer to listen ... Sometimes we must endure the discomfort of seeing the pain of others without being able to intervene."

Dr. Puri has been a witness to a grief both particular and poignant. But her charge rings true, regardless of the cause of another's suffering. In a world plagued by threats of all kinds — from deadly viruses to deadly force — we are called to be witnesses, to look when we would rather look away.

We all have moments when we need to retreat to the mountaintop — to surround ourselves with the sounds of birdsong and bells and bask in the goodness of God's grace. But, after we've rested in the presence of the Holy, we must come down the mountain and make a home in the world. Sometimes this means coming face-to-face with those who cry out for healing and hope; sometimes this means bearing witness to another's pain.

It can be hard to look upon suffering, especially from a distance — to watch as neighbors across the sea are forced to flee their homes or take up arms to defend their homeland. We feel powerless in the face of such evil. But we do have a choice. We can choose not to look away, and we can commit ourselves to Christ's work of liberating love right here, right now. Perhaps this means sitting with a friend until the stranglehold of grief starts to loosen its grip. Perhaps this means mentoring a child, until they can imagine a life unencumbered by despair and self-doubt. Perhaps this means joining in a vigil of prayer or a protest for peace. Perhaps this means offering nothing more than the gift of your presence, trusting that Christ is present, too.

This is what it looks like to live *in* the world, to share life with others in all its sorrow and all its joy. And, as we bear witness to the pain of others, we strive also — always — to bear witness to the liberating love of Christ. However we come alongside others who are walking through shadowed valleys, we pray that the light of Christ will shine through us. And we pray that — by God's grace — those who cry out for healing and hope will be surprised by the greatness of God ... That, through grace, they will find themselves so embraced by God's love that — even at the base of the mountain — they are touched by the healing peace of heaven.

Friends — We will not, we *dare* not look away. And standing together amidst the suffering of this world may we all be transformed and transfigured by the glory of God.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Loving and gracious God we come before you this morning with much upon our hearts and minds - concern for this your world as invasions and war explode and peace shatters. Concern for continued health in the face of the ongoing pandemic and the pain and loss this tragedy has brought to us all. Concern for equity and justice in our country as we recognize how far we have fallen short from our

stated values. Concern for this planet as climate change ravages your creation and endangers our stewardship of your gift of this world.

And, yet O God, as we struggle with the challenges before us, those of our community, those of our world and those more personal, we do so in the light of your message of hope, love and reconciliation. We do so comforted by your presence and the glory bestowed on your son, and our Savior, Jesus Christ. We do so informed and inspired by the words of scripture and the truth they reveal. We do so knowing that you will be with us as we confront the concerns and fears that confound and trouble us. And, we know you will be with us as we seek to be advocates for peace in our world.

We are grateful this morning for the life of Jesus and for the countless ways in which he enriches our lives. It is transformative to understand that Jesus, like us, faced both the joy and the sorrow of human life. And so, from the scripture passage read this morning we are comforted in knowing, O God, that Jesus was, and is, your Chosen, and that he provides us, if we would follow him, the way to a rich, full and impactful life.

Thank you, gracious God, for providing us with a clear way forward. Thank you for allowing us to see that even as Jesus was transfigured he continued to focus on others when he came back down that mountain. And, thank you for the knowledge that your call to Jesus is also your call to us to do your work in the world.

Hear our prayers this morning, our God, those both spoken and unspoken, and grant us the assurance, the peace, and the inspiration only you can provide. This we ask with praise and with gratitude in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us how to live, and taught us how to pray 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, the power and the glory forever. Amen.**