



“Tell the Story”
Scripture – Mark 9:2-9
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, February 11, 2024

There is a touching moment in the series *Call the Midwife* that speaks to the blessing of being fully known. A young couple sits at the kitchen table discussing details of their upcoming wedding. The bride shares a story she’s never told her fiancé before and, then, a thought dawns. She turns to the groom and says: *I suppose the day will come when we’ve told one another everything. And we won’t have anything new to say. Because — one way or another — we’ve shared everything that matters.*¹

Over the last eight years, we have shared many things that matter ... Certainly not what a couple could share over a lifetime of marriage; that is a particular kind of knowing. But, during the years I’ve served as your pastor, we have shared the fullness of life together. You have heard about people and places that have formed me in the faith. And you have blessed me with stories of your own: stories of love and loved ones lost; stories of disappointment or triumph, of worry or hope; stories about how you became the people you are today. Yes, we have shared many things that matter.

On this — my final Sunday with you — I want to recall a story that matters to me. It’s one I may have told you before; at this point, I’ve lost track. It’s not a story I can claim as my own, but one that has laid claim to me ever since my mom began reading this children’s book to me at bedtime. It is the story of Miss Rumphius.²

When we meet Miss Rumphius, she is a little girl who lives with her grandfather. In the evenings she listens to her grandfather’s stories, and she promises to follow in his footsteps: “I, too, will go to faraway places,” she says. “I, too, will live by the sea.” And her grandfather replies: “That is all very well, little Alice. But there is a third thing you must do ... You must do something to make the world more beautiful.”

Alice grows up. She visits tropical islands; she rides camels across the desert. And, when her traveling days are done, she settles down by the sea and turns her attention to that third thing she must do. So, Miss Rumphius plants seeds — lupine seeds, to be precise. She spends the summer wandering over fields,

¹ *Call the Midwife*, Season 6, Episode 8 (2017).

² Barbara Cooney, *Miss Rumphius* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982).

scattering seeds along country lanes and behind the church, around the schoolhouse and beside old stone walls. Come spring there are lupines all over town. The hillsides are covered with brilliant blue and purple and rose-colored blooms. There are flowers everywhere. It's the kind of sight that would inspire passersby to echo Isaiah's claim: "The whole earth is full of [God's] glory!" (6:3) Miss Rumphius has done the third, most difficult thing of all: she has made the world more beautiful.

Now, I've not *set out* to follow in the footsteps of Alice Rumphius. And yet this story has given shape to my life. I, too, love to travel the world. I'm still waiting for the day God calls me to settle by the sea. (Though, as a native of St. Louis, I have made great strides in getting closer to the ocean!) But, most of all, I share Alice's determination to make the world more beautiful. At its simplest, I feel this is the essence of God's call upon my life. At its simplest, this is the essence of God's call upon **all** our lives. As followers of Jesus, the Spirit sends us to transform our communities until they more fully reflect God's vision for creation. We are charged with sowing seeds of love, of generosity, of compassion, of grace. In short, we are called to make the world more beautiful, so that others might behold the glory and grace of God, so that others might echo the prophet's claim: "The whole earth is full of [God's] glory!"

The story Mark sets before us today is an invitation to behold the glory and grace of God. Christ's Transfiguration is a rare moment when the Gospel writer pulls back the curtain — when he lifts the veil of secrecy — to reveal the *fullness* of who Jesus is. Thus far Mark's Jesus has been very tight-lipped; any time someone realizes that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the long-awaited Messiah orders them to keep quiet. Even at Jesus' baptism — when **we** first overheard the voice from heaven — it seems none of the people gathered at the river heard God's pronouncement. After all, Mark tells us, the voice from heaven spoke directly to Jesus: **You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.**"

But now, here — on this high mountain — God reveals to Peter and James and John that *this* is the Beloved Son. In the transfigured face of Jesus, these disciples glimpse a greater truth. With their own eyes, they see that Jesus is more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a miracle-worker ... He is none other than the Son of God. It is as if Mark is illustrating the claim his fellow evangelist makes in the first chapter of John: "We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1.14) Yes — as Jesus' clothes turn dazzling white and Moses and Elijah appear at his side — these disciples behold the fullness of Jesus' identity, they behold the fullness of God's grace.

Peter is so overcome by the sight that he feels compelled to pitch a tent on the mountaintop, to make a dwelling place for these holy ones. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here," he says. *It is good for us to be here* — in this place where the veil between heaven and earth grows thin; in this place where we see more fully who Jesus is; in this place where we are invited to bask in the glory of God.

Friends, we know something about such places, about such moments. There have been so many times over the last eight years when I — like Peter — have found myself lost in wonder, love and praise:

I have been surprised by glimpses of God's glory at the font, when a newly-baptized babe locks eyes with a new sibling in Christ and giggles with delight; and at the table, when I see wonder written upon your faces as you partake of the bread and cup and taste nothing less than the grace of God. I have been surprised by glimpses of glory when the crescendo of the choir or the swell of the organ have all but lifted us into heaven; or when the sun shines upon us — streaming through brilliant stained glass — as if offering its own benediction.

And, as often as I have been surprised by glory within these walls, I dare say I've seen Christ even more clearly in moments shared beyond this Sanctuary ... In the way this congregation has welcomed refugees fleeing peril and persecution in Afghanistan; and in the way Westminster rallied to purchase the property next door, so that we can help provide a place of welcome for neighbors recovering from substance abuse or incarceration. I've seen Christ across the globe, where the steadfast love of this congregation has transformed the lives of women and young people in Guatemala. And in the tireless efforts of our Earth Care Task Force to care for creation, so that the whole earth might continue to show forth God's glory. I have glimpsed Christ in the simple but profound ways you care for one another: by knitting prayer shawls and delivering flowers and writing messages of love to those in crisis and praying for one another without ceasing. I have found myself overcome with awe as we've shared simple moments of ministry — while reading Scripture together, and discovering that the Spirit is still breathing new life into ancient words; while witnessing the way everyday saints have nurtured our children in the faith; even during the mundane tasks of ministry, like sitting 'round a committee table where new ideas are generated ... new seeds to be planted, which — I trust — will yield brilliant blooms that show forth the glory of God.

I so relate to Peter's words: *Rabbi, it is good for us to be here.* Friends, it has been so good for us to be here, together, for eight years. I am grateful for every glimpse of God's glory. I am grateful for the ways you have reflected to me the fullness of who Christ is through your commitment to following Christ's greatest commandments: Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

In some ways, it would be tempting to pitch a tent and bask in the glory surrounding us. But that is not God's call on my life. In fact, basking in the glory, prolonging the moment, clinging to the veil that's grown thin on the mountaintop is not God's call on *any* of our lives. The voice from heaven makes that clear: *This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!*

For Peter, James, and John, listening to Jesus means following him down the mountain. We know where this journey will lead. It will take them from Galilee to Judea — to the palm-strewn streets of Jerusalem, to Gethsemane, to the cross. The disciples should know this, too; Jesus has told them that the Messiah will suffer and die and, on the third day, rise again. For the first followers, the journey down the mountain will not be an easy one.

But Jesus also offers them a word of hope. This assurance is wrapped in a curious command; for awe-struck disciples it would be easy to miss. As Jesus leads Peter and James and John down the mountain, he orders them to tell no one about what they have seen, until *after* the Son of Man has risen from the dead. *Tell no one about what you have seen, until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead.*

With that, the veil of secrecy Mark lifted on the mountain falls back in place. The disciples are supposed to keep this story to themselves. They're not supposed to tell others what they have seen. Not yet anyway. Not until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead. But nestled within this curious command is a promise. It's a promise that they *will* glimpse God's glory again. It's a promise that — in his resurrection — they will see even more clearly who this Jesus is. What's more, the whole world will behold the fullness of God's grace revealed in Jesus.

Friends, Jesus also calls us to continue the journey. He is *ever* leading us onward — you to continue your ministry in the same place, though never by standing still. Me to set out on a new path, though — with the Spirit’s leading — still following in the footsteps of Christ. And, though we are parting company, we can all journey onward in hope, trusting that Jesus will guide us again and again to sites where we behold God’s glory and grace.

Even now Christ is leading you into the next chapter of your journey, as the Spirit raises up new leaders, some of whom are serving as officers for the first time. Each brings unique gifts and fresh energy to the ministries to which they have been called. And, even as we celebrate the new thing God is doing in and through these faithful ones, we give thanks that the Spirit continues to sustain the commitment and passion of so many others serving in so many ways. Given the faithfulness of this congregation, it’s easy to believe that God will continue to surprise you with glimpses of glory. Perhaps these will blossom from seeds already planted; perhaps they will spring forth from efforts we haven’t yet imagined. But this we trust: God’s glory will show forth in the ways you care for one another and the world.

And so, I leave you with this charge: Tell the story. Tell others, far and wide, what you have seen.

It may sound like I’m contradicting the command of Christ in this text. But I think I’m on solid ground, since we are living in a time *after* the Son of Man has risen from the dead. The Christ we follow is none other than the *risen* Christ. And, at the end of Mark’s Gospel, the risen Christ commands his followers to “go into all the world and proclaim the good news” (16:15).

So, I repeat: Tell the story. Tell others what you have seen in this place. Tell them about the times *you* have been lost in wonder, love and praise. Tell them about the times *you* have come away with a fuller understanding of who Jesus is ... Not because you should be boasting. But because the world will be changed in the telling. The world will become a more beautiful place because of your witness.

So, talk about the things that have mattered deeply to you: The trip to Guatemala, where you saw with your own eyes the radiant smiles that brighten women’s faces as they talk about how the revolving funds project has helped them sustain their families. Or the prayer shawl that helped you feel wrapped in love as you navigated the wilderness of grief. Talk about the grace shared over a meal at Clarke House. Tell about the seeds you have seen blossom into brilliant blooms that show forth God’s glory. And the seeds that have been sown, which you trust the Spirit will bring to fruition.

More importantly, tell the story with your lives. And — as you strive to love God and neighbor — trust that you are helping others come to a fuller understanding of who Christ is ... trust that, through you, the Spirit is making good on Jesus’ promise that the world will behold the glory and grace of God.

Friends, tell the story. And I will tell it, too. I will speak of the many glimpses of glory I witnessed in this place. I will speak of the ways you revealed to me the fullness of who Jesus is. Of how, by sowing love and generosity and compassion and grace — with the same reckless abandon with which Miss Rumphius scattered lupine seeds — you have made the world a more beautiful place. Of how, by sharing life with you, you have better equipped me to do the same.