

“Up and Down the Mountain” - Matthew 17:1-9
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church

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As I mentioned earlier, yesterday I had the privilege of going before the North Alabama Presbytery to be examined in order to be ordained into the ministry and installed to officially be your pastor. Thankfully, I can report that they told me I could stay with you! So that is news worth celebrating. I have to admit, though, it was nerve-wracking leading up the meeting yesterday, knowing that I would be examined on the floor of presbytery.

The easy part is that you are presented one pre-determined question, which is given to you beforehand so that you can adequately prepare for it. The difficult part is that they open the floor of presbytery up after that and anyone can ask you ANY question... and I do mean ANY question. I have heard horror stories from other ministers over the years who have encountered that one lone rogue member who wants to make it as hard as possible on the candidate by asking impossibly difficult questions or trap questions.

So fearing the worst, I spent the last couple of weeks wracking my brain trying to think of things they could ask me. I went back and studied key theological tenets of our reformed, Presbyterian heritage that I learned in seminary. I poured over our Book of Order.

And you know how many questions they asked me from the floor? Big, fat zero! I was so relieved; I'm not going to lie to you.

The real reason I mention yesterday, though, is because I was also asked to preach. They told me that I could preach on whatever I wanted, and that's always a tough thing for me. I always find it so hard to choose just one thing to preach on because, I don't know if you know this, but there's a lot of great stuff in here! (pick up Bible)

I ended up preaching on the story from Genesis of Jacob wrestling with God on the riverbank. It's such an odd story. Jacob actually wrestles with God, though! They struggle all through the night, and neither one will give in. It actually ends in a draw. But not before God strikes Jacob on the hip, leaving him with a limp. Then God blesses Jacob, and then gives him a new name.

How bizarre! Maybe that's why I love that story, I don't know.

My point is, the Bible is full of stories that can leave us scratching our heads. Today's story from the Gospel of Matthew is no exception.

It says, “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.”

I don't know about y'all, but when I read that, it takes me a minute to comprehend what is happening. If it's confusing to me just reading it, imagine actually being Peter, James, and John that day as Jesus is physically transformed...transfigured to this supernatural light shining like the sun and clothes in dazzling white. Jesus, in all his glory, revealed to the three disciples that day.

And if that isn't enough, guess who shows up and joins the party? Moses and Elijah! It reminds me of the Blues Brothers movie with John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd. Their characters, Jake and Elwood Blues, have been released from prison, and they're sent on a mission from God. Part of the movie involves them going and finding their former musician buddies to reunite. They tell each one of them, "We're getting the band back together."

That's almost what I feel like is happening in our story. Jesus is getting the band back together. We've got Moses, we've got Elijah, and we've got Jesus. Who are we missing? Oh, that's right! The voice of God! Let's add that to our story.

The text says, "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!"

Those poor disciples. I'm sure Peter, James, and John thought they were going for a nice, peaceful hike to the top of a mountain, and boy did they get more than they bargained for.

In Christian circles, you'll often hear of people having "mountain-top experiences" after transformative moments or after attending meaningful conferences or retreats. But they got nothing on Peter, James, and John!

So what in the world do we make of all of this? What do we make of Jesus being transfigured with a face shining like the sun...of Moses and Elijah conversing with Jesus...of God speaking that day?

It may not be completely obvious to us in our day and time, but for those reading or listening to the Gospel around the time it was written, they would have heard a story that makes sense to them.

They would have made a clear connection. Moses represented the law of ancient Israel, while Elijah represented the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. They are there with Jesus, their spiritual heir...the one who joins them in God's grand story and redemptive work for Israel and for the world.

And if Moses and Elijah's presence isn't enough to drive the point home, God's voice rings out to further pass the torch: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

So while this story is fantastical and supernatural, what is happening here is that Jesus is being revealed...fully and completely...in all of his resplendent glory as the Son of God.

This is such a different picture of Jesus than we see in the rest of the gospels. When I think of Jesus during his ministry and his teaching, I think of well-worn sandals, the bottom of his robe caked with dried mud. I think of dirt under his fingernails, probably sore muscles from all of his travels. I tend to think of the fully human Jesus, mostly because that's what I can most closely relate to.

I can hardly relate to his fully divine self, shining like the sun. But to me, this is the miracle of the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Jesus, who is fully human and fully divine, is the one who walks with the disciples up the mountain. That same Jesus, who moments before was transformed before their eyes, is the Jesus who tells them not to be afraid, and who walks alongside his friends back down the mountain.

Hear the good news this morning: it's that same Jesus, in all his glory, who walks with you and with me...as we make treks up and down the mountains of our own lives. PAUSE.

So how should we respond to this good news?

For that, let's turn our attention back to our text from 2 Peter. It says, "For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty... We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

Be attentive to this as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. PAUSE

I am reminded of a story told by Lutheran Pastor Rev. Susan Gamelin about her work in a small village in Tanzania and a boy she met named Amos. She sat with him and 700 other villagers one Sunday under a large tree that shaded them from the hot, African sun.

She said, "At the right time, Jesus nudged me in the ribs and told me to watch Amos, as he joined the offering procession and came forward with his contribution. I saw his face shine with the light of Christ. I smiled because his smile sparkled with his love of Jesus.

I beamed at his joy so radiant that even his threadbare, one-size-too-large suit seemed dazzling. In his hands was one coin for the offering basket. His hands. Ah, his hands. His palms really, since his fingers had been almost totally consumed by the leprosy that ate them up before the missionaries and their medicines arrived.

His offering - one coin - rested on those tiny palms. A small offering - one Tanzanian coin worth almost nothing in our viewpoint, but Amos' coin was an offering of great value since it was almost, if not all, he had.

You see, Amos knows the reality of death. He knows what it is to be last of all and servant of all. Amos drinks deeply from Jesus' cup and knows Jesus' baptism, and Amos shines. On stubby feet, his toes eaten too, he shines as he offers himself to Jesus. Amos' life reflects the light of a transfigured Jesus, of a brilliant risen Son."

Amos himself was like a light shining in a dark place.

And guess what? You can be a light shining in a dark place, as well.

With Jesus it becomes clear that, we, too, are meant to be transfigured. We are to be transfigured, not as Jesus is, but as his disciples have been, disciples of all times and places, disciples like Amos.

We, by ourselves, are not the source of the light. That role belongs to Jesus.

I've heard it described like this. Think of the moon. The moon itself does not radiate light, but it reflects the light of the sun to shine in our dark sky.

So it should be with you. And with me.

Jesus, in all his glory, shines as a beacon of hope and peace and love for a world that is in the dark. But Jesus, while fully divine, is also the one who was fully human as he walked the path up and down with the disciples...and Jesus is the one who walks with us up and down the mountains of our lives.

Friends, be transformed. Reflect Jesus' light for all to see.

And if that's scary thought, be comforted...do not be afraid...for Jesus walks with you.

To God be the Glory. Now and forevermore. Amen.