

February 11, 2018 • The Transfiguration of the Lord • Commissioning of the 2018 Haiti Mission Team

## **“on transfiguration and being terrified by unconditional love”**

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



Mark 9:2-9

*Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. 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. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.*

A few years ago I was a pastor for a youth camp up in the mountains outside of San Diego. One of the traditions of the camp is for a small group of high schoolers to wake up in the middle of the night and hike to the top of a local mountain to watch the sunrise. In theory it sounded like a great time and when one of the groups asked if I would join them I decided to say yes.

It really was better in theory than in practice. In practice it meant that I had to set an alarm for 3:00am, wake myself up by splashing cold water on my face, get myself outfitted with the appropriate clothing, warm clothes for the way up and cooler clothing for the hike down. I met the group down at the base of the mountain, where they had slept overnight. The teenagers, of course, were all up and excited about the adventure. So eager in fact that they wanted to get started hiking right away. But I told them I had to stretch a little bit first because, well I'm getting older. And then we set off, in the darkness, making our way up the mountain side.

It's kind of funny how quickly that eagerness, excitement and anticipation fades when you are climbing a mountain. It's tough work. It was steep and steady, the trail was well maintained but difficult. Pretty soon the high schoolers had gone from excited and chatty, to quiet and reserved.

We ascended the mountain slowly, as a group in the darkness of early morning, all hiking together to make sure that we were safe and sound.

There were quite a few points along the way where I questioned: why I am doing this? I thought to myself, I've paid my dues over the years, I've been part of these types of adventures, I've done lock-ins and slept on the floor of gyms, I've led mission trips and broom ball, why did I agree to be part of this trek?

As we neared the top we stopped for one final water break with a view of the summit within our reach. That's when it seemed to hit us all, a second wind, a new found energy, renewal, and hope. As we finally made it to the summit, we looked all around us and we could see for miles in every direction; the sleepy country side as we all prepared for first light.

The sun rose slowly and magnificently over the eastern horizon. There was a cold and gentle breeze as we watched the light dance across the country side and up the mountain we had just scaled.

On top of that mountain everything that had been stewing around in my mind suddenly faded away. All that was and had been, shifted. My perspective was transformed and I could now see, in a new and different way, my place in this world, this beautiful and sacred world.

It's interesting how a mountain top can change your perspective on everything. You see world differently, you see the world more broadly, you see yourself for who you are, a small and beautiful and wondrous part of this vast creation. Mountain tops change everything.

It's no wonder then why mountain tops play such an important part in the history of our faith and in the bible. Mountain tops were one of three places where people would go in order to encounter the divine, to experience a revelation.

These three places are mountain tops, the wilderness, and the sea. These are the three places where folks would venture in order to meet God. These are the wild and untamed places of the world. Places where we truly understand our power and our powerlessness, they are places where we go to remember, in a visceral and experiential way how much we rely upon the grace and the goodness of God each and every moment of each and every day.

These are the places we go to strip away the layers of ego driven identity we lay upon ourselves, places we go to surrender all that we aren't, to be our true self, our vulnerable self. And it's in these moments of humility and vulnerability when we are open enough, raw enough, to see everything differently and to catch glimpses of that which is always true, that God is with us.

Now this morning we heard a story of a mountain top, a transfiguration, an epiphany, a manifestation of God. Jesus takes three disciples, James, John and Peter, on a hiking trip up to a mountain top, apart from others and from the world, a sacred time of pilgrimage, of journeying together in community.

When they reach the top of the mountain Jesus experiences this miracle of transfiguration. He is transformed before their very eyes and suddenly they are gazing upon him in the fullness of God's glory. This miracle stands out because it is the only miracle during Jesus' life that happens to Jesus. All of the other miracles happen through Jesus but not to Jesus.

There he is, the transfigured Christ, shining bright like the sun in front of some of his closet followers and friends, when suddenly Moses and Elijah appear talking with Jesus.

What a moment this must have been. I can only imagine. And it is in this moment that Peter jumps in and interjects himself with this odd comment. He says, “Rabbi, it’s good for us to be here, let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

Now maybe you yourself have experienced a moment like this in your life. A moment where you can just feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, a moment that is sacred and holy, and so big that it feels overwhelming. A moment of truth and vulnerability that just feels too big for you to bear, so much so that it feels a little bit terrifying, even if it is awesome and extraordinary and joyful, you still feel terrified by love.

Maybe it’s hearing the first cry of your new born baby, or maybe it’s when you see your soon-to-be spouse for the first time on your wedding day, or perhaps it’s standing hand in hand with your brother and sister as you pray together for your parent as they take their last breath.

It’s in these moments where we sometimes think and say something that sounds a little bit hasty or silly, in a way to claim and name all that we are experiencing. This is what Peter is doing as he says, hey guys, maybe we can build three dwellings to memorialize this event. Peter is overwhelmed by the glory of the grace of God, this love and compassion in the person of Jesus that surpasses all our understanding, and he wants to do something, to build something, to have something tangible to commemorate this experience.

I think many of us can identify with this response. Sometimes, it seems, we have a hard time just simply standing back and allowing the grace of a moment to wash over us without feeling that urge to do something to make it real.

But as the story goes on we hear that immediately the disciples are enveloped in a cloud, and a voice from the cloud says to them, “This is my son, my beloved, listen to him!” This is my son, my beloved, listen to him.

It is almost as if the voice of God is responding to Peter’s desire to do something in response to this experience of grace. Instead, God says, be present in this moment, take in the moment and accept it as a sign of my unconditional love for the world. And if you want to do something in response to this love, listen to Jesus, listen to his way, for he is the way of abundant life-giving love.

Listening isn’t always an easy thing to do. And in this world that we currently live in there just isn’t a lot of listening going on right now. Between the divisiveness of our current cultural climate and our portable, escape or distract my way through life, devices we call our iPhones; it seems as though we are not really taking the time to listen to one another.

What emerged from this story and this text for me this last week was this very simple and fundamental spiritual practice we see Jesus model throughout the gospels, of listening to those who are other, those who are totally different from him. He does this again and again and again.

So it occurred to me that if we are to listen to Jesus, as the voice of God calls us to do, then perhaps we should try to listen like Jesus. What a countercultural spiritual practice to prime the pump for us as we head into this season of Lent. Perhaps we can practice listening to others without condition, without judgment, without formulating in our heads what we are going to say in response. Perhaps this can be a tangible way to practice our faith; to live and love differently in this world.

So this week, perhaps we can seek out someone in our life who we have a really hard time listening to. Maybe it’s a coworker, maybe it’s a neighbor, or maybe it’s a member of your family.

Start with someone you know in your life, someone you see regularly, someone you have an embodied relationship with. Take some time to listen to them like Jesus. Now if you are wondering to yourself, how does one, actually listen like Jesus, I’d like to suggest three guidelines for this spiritual practice which I picked up from a friend and colleague:

1. Be unusually curious about the other- be unusually curious about the other person you are listening to, whoever they may be.
2. Stay in the difference- resist the urge to withdraw or argue when differences arise, and really resist the urge you have to be right about everything all the time.
3. Don’t compare your best to their worst- Don’t compare the best parts of you to the worst parts of them.

Practicing this in your life may not be easy; it will take some self-denial and self-sacrifice. But maybe our spiritual practice of living like Jesus in this world, is kind of like climbing a mountain. It’s a process of slowly shedding those things that divide us and hold us down. It’s a process of learning to see this world more broadly and to see our place within this world more clearly. It’s about shifting our perspective so that we can see more and more glimpses of that truth that underlies our existence, that God’s love surrounds us and binds us to one another and all creation, bringing about redemption, reconciliation and a hope beyond all hope.

This week our Haiti team is going forth on our behalf to be part of that work of redemption, reconciliation and hope beyond all hope. They will be living, working and learning from our Haitian friends as they come alongside the Methodist Church of Haiti to do all the good that they can. My prayer for our team and for us all is that we will have hearts that are open to receive grace given, eyes that are open to see the glory of God shining all around, and ears that are open to listen for the spirit of God speaking to us through the most unlikely of people.

May it be so through the grace of God. Amen.