

Today is transfiguration Sunday; it marks the end of the season of Epiphany and moves us toward the beginning of Lent. Each year the gospel lesson comes from a different Gospel in a three-year cycle: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Today is Matthew.

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, 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. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, 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!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

The gospel starts ominously. Six days later, six days after Peter had gotten it all right, after he confessed you are the Christ the Son of the Living God. Six days after he had gotten it all wrong in response to Jesus’ telling of his own upcoming torturous execution by the Romans. In response, Peter declared never; you can’t die that way. Wrong. Six days later, Jesus said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan.”

Six days later though, Peter, still in the inner circle, goes up a mountain with James and John. Even when we are all wrong, really wrong, Jesus does not let us go. And Peter and the others catch a glimpse of the glory of Jesus, as he appears to be shining.

Matthew is using a lot of imagery here. Moses is on the mountain with his face shining; not just Moses, Elijah is there too. Remember he had a mountain top battle with the prophets of Baal. Jesus is pictured as standing in line with Moses, the law, and Elijah the prophet.

In Hillsboro I had a phrase I would use during story time with the children when they would start pushing the envelope of appropriate behavior. Two kids would try it regularly. I would say, “Sacred ground,” to remind them that they were in church, in a holy place.

Peter realizes he is on sacred ground. He is not sure what is going on, but he knows something holy is happening. Peter again gets it wrong as he starts talking about building three booths, perhaps three shrines. But you can’t blame Peter. This is a powerful experience and even though it is beyond his understanding, he knows it is important. He wants to hang on to it.

Jimmy Buffett has a song, “I wish lunch could last forever.” Peter wants this moment to last forever. We have those perfect moments we would like to grasp and hold onto forever. Harry Chapin in a song “Jubilation” from *The Cotton Patch Gospel* musical puts it this way:

Everybody wants to touch his dream just one time (Jubilation)
I know I’ll never ever get this close again (Jubilation)
Everybody wants to feel that feeling sometime (Jubilation)

That's why I don't want today to come to an end.

Read more: <https://www.letssingit.com/harry-chapin-lyrics-jubilation-bq734g2#ixzz4ZbqqEGmV>

It is that transcendent moment when things are more than real and we are more than amazed that we, too, have what is called a mountain top experience. And we want it to last, even when we cannot really grasp it all. And that is to be expected with encounters with the living God. God is so much more than we can imagine; that is, God is transcendent. Many of us have had these encounters. We are amazed and warm inside with a mixture of awe and fear. It's not quite clear of course because we can't get our head around God. But we know it is vital and we want hold on to that experience forever. But we can't.

Another thing I have learned about my sacred experiences is that you can't force them. They are nearly impossible to recreate. I have gone back to special places and discovered that I could not recreate the experience I was seeking. I could remember it, but it just wasn't the same. The sense of the holy and sacred cannot necessarily be duplicated by merely repeating the circumstances. God comes in moments of mystery, awe and wonder that we cannot control.

So God interrupts Peter in his efforts to hold onto this moment and essentially says, "Be quiet, this is my beloved son. Listen to him." I think this is the heart of the passage. The voice of the Living God comes to those gathered on that mountaintop that day. "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." I know there are some folks who hold the notion that religion should steer clear of politics, but this statement of God calling Jesus "my Son" is one of the most political in the Bible. Roman emperors were considered gods, and sons of gods. But the voice from heaven claims, "This is my son. The others are false gods of state, tyranny and hatred." Here is the holy declaration that Jesus is a lawgiver like Moses and a prophet like Elijah but more. Jesus is the Son of God. Moreover, Augustus and his clan are not.

Jesus is God's son, not merely a great preacher or teacher. "This is my beloved son. Listen to him," words not just for those on the mountain but for us as well.

And therein opens for us the heart of faith which begins with listening to Jesus. We are invited to join the "Red Letter Christian Movement", those Bibles that have the words of Jesus in red. Well this movement asks us to take seriously the heart of those teachings as we structure our daily lives. In many ways, it is "What would Jesus do?" taken seriously, as we earnestly seek to understand what Jesus **would** do. Red Letter Christians think the right and the left have become so partisan that a new approach is needed. They seek to pursue social justice issues and base that approach in the words of Jesus. They seek to listen to him.

So the disciples, overwhelmed and over awed, fall to their knees in amazement. And then it is over. Jesus is left alone with the disciples and he does two things: he touches them and says, "Do not be afraid." He affirms them with a loving touch and tells them, "Fear not." It is a phrase we remember happens often in the Bible when God approaches. "Fear not; I am with you." But even though the experience is over I think it makes possible all that happens with Peter from that point forward. In this event not only do the three see Jesus changed, but they, too, are changed by this peak experience. Oh, of course, we know that Peter will fall down again, but he will be lifted up again by Jesus to lead the disciples.

We know of Dr King's great lines "I have a dream" and "I've been to the mountain top." But I think what gave him the drive and ability to be such a great leader was a mountaintop experience. Or better still, a tabletop experience. He was sitting at his kitchen table and he describes it this way in regarding his leadership in Montgomery bus boycott. In "Stride Toward Freedom" he says:

"I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

"The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. 'I am here, taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.'

"At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: 'Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.' Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything."

Many of us have these kinds of moments of clarity from God. Many of us are who we are and followed the life path we chose because we sensed a touch of the divine reaching out to us and urging us forward. I ask you to reflect on that today. Recall your own moment of a life-changing encounter with God.

Right now I need this kind of word from God. How about you? Many of us do. All too often we are the person whose faith is wavering. God does not seem real any more. The challenges we face feel overwhelming. When asked what we are doing about it, I hear people say, "I have disengaged from church, from prayer, from God, from all that religious stuff. It seems like I was just going through the motions. I can't go on."

That is the normal response, but I want to suggest another path. There are two things we can do if our faith is wavering. And they are just the opposite of lamenting in despair. First, we can look back at our life and see how we got to the place we are and seek to see the hand of God in our lives at various points. Many of us can find those places where God was active in a real way. And second, instead of disengaging, reengage. When a close relationship is hurting, human or divine, the natural response is to disengage, but that is when we need to reengage, not in some toxic or overbearing way, but by refusing to give up on someone important to us. Don't give up on God. Don't give up on our calling.

Like all good things, this mountaintop experience comes to an end. And Jesus gives them some sage advice as they move down the mountain. Don't tell anyone till I am raised. I think you will understand better if you let this digest and play out. I know that is how I am with ideas. People ask, "Well, what do you think?" and sometimes I don't know. In an age of instant gratification, I prefer to sleep on it. It takes a while to ponder and understand and often that is done best in careful thought. It takes the resurrection to see Jesus change from glory into glory. And then they can declare, "Wow! I can see God's hand in this now though I couldn't then."

Then they are on the ground and the glory begins to fade. But that is life. Life is not lived in the ecstatic peak experiences. For the most part, it is living in the valley of the everyday. This is where we live out the life that those mountaintop experiences call. We are focused on kids, grandkids, great grandkids, grocery shopping, the

doctor, politics or daily work, which is where we live. And that is where God's call is lived out. And the message of the gospel is that while God seems so clear on those special occasions, God is with us in the everyday as well. That is God's immanence. God is not just in the beyond; God is with us: Immanuel.

Jesus accompanies the disciples down the mountain and the first thing that happens is a difficult healing. Our faith-filled lives must be lived out in the everyday, sometimes facing great difficulty. But we are not alone. Even though we are no longer on the mountain, God is as close as our hearts and so is the message, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him." Listen, not only in those glory days but every day.