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Matthew 17:1-9

CHANGED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

This morning we switch from one mountain to another. The last few weeks in the Lectionary we have been meandering through Jesus' primary teachings, a sermon he gave from earlier in Matthew's gospel, geographically titled the Sermon on the Mount. Now we head a little closer to Jerusalem, but up a different mountain to witness something else.

What is witnessed is the transfiguration, a word that was sort of culled up from Latin bases to translate the Greek word *metamorpho*, which is, of course, where we also get the word metamorphosis. It is a change - a physical change that is visible to other people, but perhaps something more profound than Justin Bieber getting a haircut or someone dropping a few pounds. This is deep change that has a physical component. For Jesus it is light.

Dramatic things often happen on mountains in the Bible and this is where people frequently go to have an encounter with God. It makes sense. If your cosmology has God living up there, then the closer you get to "up there", the closer you are to God. We still call our profound experiences mountaintop moments. Now I don't have that same geographical locality for God, but I can bear witness to being on the side of mountains as a prime locale for spiritual experiences. Still, I think that has more to do with being in nature and away from our co-opting of the natural world. There is something about God that gets stifled by the pavement.

Jesus selects three disciples to go up on the mountain with him. In other gospels, they are headed up there to pray - sort of a respite before they head into Jerusalem and what they know is coming. But Matthew says nothing about intended activities, only that they go and there Jesus is transformed. He shines like the sun and his clothes blaze with whiteness. Just as suddenly, the cultural heroes of Israel, Moses and Elijah, appear. Don't get distracted by the special effects, this is more than just high drama, it is a direct comparison...a deliberate attempt to get us to see Jesus connected to Moses and Elijah.

Why is this? Were Moses and Elijah just in the neighborhood and decided to drop by? I mean, what is it exactly that Jesus, Elijah and Moses would be talking about – all gathered there in a little messiah huddle? Is Elijah sympathizing with Jesus' troubles getting anyone to really hear what he has to say – a common complaint of prophets? Is Moses commiserating with Jesus about the irony that you must fight people in order to lead them to their own freedom? Are they both there to impart some crucial piece of information that Jesus wasn't told before he was dispatched to earth on this special mission?

Now maybe this is just a show – you know, the disciples near and Jesus wanting to impress them. “Hey Moses, put your hand on my shoulder and then laugh like I said something really funny. OK, are they looking?” Or maybe these two former saviors are complementing the newest member of the club - “Wow, Jesus, your robes are so dazzlingly white – do you use a color safe bleach?”

But despite all of my wondering about the messiah convention, it is the human reaction that really intrigues me. Peter sees all of this, he is as stunned as any of us would be seeing this spectacular scene and his response is...to interrupt. Really? Isn't this a better time to display a little humility? Peter wants to focus on the majesty, and to hold onto that, as if he could capture God in a bottle. Wouldn't this be a better time to consider what constitutes holiness instead of seizing the moment to your own advantage? Of course it does kind of make sense. Peter is the “rock” upon which the church is built in Christian tradition and what better rock to symbolize the church than one that seems more interested in talking than listening?

Peter offers to do a little development of the mountaintop - build some condos for the saintly beings. Frankly I think that Peter is doing what human beings do with visions of holiness – trying to preserve it...to stay in that moment as if the holiness would stay there too, maintained like some sort of exhibit at the Museum of God. He blathers on and on about the glory and sings praises and I can see him swaying back and forth with his arms in the air, singing “Holy, Holy, Holy”. Jesus just looks at him. But it is God who breaks up the scene and says AGAIN – having first said it at Jesus' baptism - “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” This is a scene designed to let us know that Jesus is up to something holy, and it isn't confined to the mountaintop. God says, listen to him...not see how glorious he looks? God is endorsing what Jesus is *doing*, not just irradiating his body. He doesn't tell us to praise his holy name with singing and architecture, he says, "Listen to what he is teaching you"...that's what brings the glory...when we *practice* what Jesus practices and are changed from the inside out.

Peter bears witness to Jesus' transformation and sees *it* as glory. But this white glow is not a mark of Jesus' divinity, it signifies God's endorsement of Jesus' methods. God is marking Jesus' outside with what is inside, and it's that inside glory that matters. Jesus tells us as his disciples that we are “the light of the world” and that we are to announce and participate in the manifestation of God's Kingdom in the world right here and right now - our outside matching our inside. In this one scene of white-hot light, God glorifies Jesus' teachings to us, the gestalt of non-violence, the measuring stick of justice and fairness and the indwelling of the Reign of God as what Jesus is doing – practicing inclusive, empire-resisting, wasteful love.

Peter rushes head first into bearing witness to Jesus as spiritual icon, but God blesses the teaching, saying “*Listen* to my Beloved”. In the culture Matthew is writing to, listening means more than just using one of your senses. It must be married to understanding, which is actionable. So you don't listen once and then are forever different, you listen as a practice and by that practice you understand are changed from the inside out. We have to go back to that other mountain earlier in this gospel to hear Jesus' sermon again...where he revises accepted practices by asking his followers to listen – you have heard it said that, but I tell you this. He warns that listening with no corresponding action has consequences...those who hear these words of mine and act on them will be like a wise man who builds his house on rock. He warns them with the Parable of the Sower that those who listen but do not understand, those who hear but do not turn that hearing into action, will yield nothing.

This instruction from God is both for the moment and for the future. Peter doesn't know the Jesus method. He thinks he does, but he and the disciples still believe that the messiah means a military victory over the Romans and Jesus as king on the throne in the temple. They're getting ready for a rude awakening. This is not Jesus' idea of the messiah, nor is it God's. Peter is going to need to develop his skills of perception pretty quickly for he will have to listen hard for God as Good Friday rolls around. It will seem like the empire has won.

And that is why you have *this* group of people on the mountain. This deliverance that God is bringing doesn't come in the halls of power, it does not look like what we call strength...it comes on the fringes, at the edges of society...amongst the people who supposedly do not count. God's Realm starts there. This message is not delivered to the high priests or the senators...it isn't given to Herod or to Caesar, it is intended for three now homeless peasant fishermen from the outskirts of the kingdom – as if God today would come to some unemployed homeless women in a tent city far away from the halls of power. I'm quite certain that legislators today believe that God is speaking to them, but the transfiguration doesn't come to such people...at least according to the Bible. That glowing white light is shining in the inner cities and the homeless shelters...in the free clinics and the homes for battered women...it is trying to shine in the life of the young man struggling with his sexuality in the unfriendly confines of a high school or the family trying to make a living and stay under the radar of a community that both exploits them and targets their immigration status.

The transfiguration story sits right here on the Sunday before Lent, like a bookend with Easter on the other side. We begin with the white glow of transfiguration and end with the mysterious glory of resurrection. Lent is a time where we can re-examine this conflict within us – where do I stand with empire and where do I stand with the Beloved? What choices will I make? This poem by Wendell Berry, called the Mad Farmer Liberation Front, lays out these choices perfectly:

Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.

And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.

When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.

Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.

Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.

Invest in the millenium. ;l Plant sequoias.

Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,

that you will not live to harvest.

Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.

Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.

Listen to carrion - put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.

Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.

So long as women do not go cheap
for power, please women more than men.

Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
a woman satisfied to bear a child?

Will this disturb the sleep
of a woman near to giving birth?

Go with your love to the fields.



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Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap. Swear allegiance
to what is nighest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.

As Lent begins I want you to consider giving something up...but chocolate isn't going to cut it as far as I'm concerned. We're way beyond a world that just has a sweet tooth problem. I want you to consider giving up the status quo. Give up the idea that you can't do anything...that you're powerless because you are one thing and the dominant culture is another thing. Give up the notion that might makes right, because if the cross tells us anything it tells us that is completely wrong. Give up this ridiculous and blasphemous idea that we can love our neighbor as ourselves and not care for our neighbor – who is always the person standing next to us – or that we can manifest the Reign of God by protecting what is rightfully ours and giving into our fear. It isn't in any way, shape or form what Jesus taught us. Make a vow – this Lent, I will pull out my Bible and read the Sermon on the Mount every week. And then do it. This is my Beloved, in whom I am well pleased...listen to him.

AMEN

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