

Those are really big promises Charles just sang about. “Show me your glory. I wanna see your face. When I climb down the mountain and get back to my life. I won’t settle for ordinary things. I’m gonna follow you forever- for all of my days.” Sometimes words are easier said or sung than lived, especially words said during a mountain top experience in our faith. Today our gospel lesson skips twelve chapters in Matthew to put us on the mountaintop with Jesus, Peter, James, John, Moses and Elijah in a very strange and maybe familiar story to some of you. Today is the final Sunday after Epiphany. It’s Transfiguration Sunday, which is the Sunday before we begin the season of Lent, the forty days that lead to the cross. The mood of this church season is beginning to change. On this Sunday we come to the end of another church season. “Having seen the lights of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long shadows of Lent” (Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.org](http://journeywithjesus.org)). This particular story of Jesus’ transfiguration, thick in theology, is also recorded in Mark and Luke. In it, we find Moses, who embodies the Law, and Elijah, who represents the Prophets. Their presence with Jesus fits Matthew’s theme that Jesus did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. This story is a small window into a much larger LOVE story that defies explanation. Though the Transfiguration story is strange, it is “more evocative than something to be figured out” (Working Preacher podcast). Keep that in mind as we turn to God’s Word for us this day but first, let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

We are told in Matthew that six days later- six days after Jesus had shared his first passion prediction- six days after Jesus had rebuked Peter saying, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not

on divine things but on human things” (16:)- six days after Jesus had said to the crowd, including his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (16:24). Six days later- after these loaded and intense conversations, Jesus took these three disciples up a high mountain away from life’s distractions...just them and Jesus. And it is no accident that this story takes place on a mountain. Remember that in Matthew, especially, the mountain is a set apart place where the disciples receive instruction and catch glimpses of Jesus’ identity” (Christopher T. Holmes, *Connections*). “Anthropologists often tell us that mountains are places of meeting between heaven and earth” (David Jacobsen, WP). These places are often referred to as “thin places”- you know- those places where we feel closer to God and God feels closer to us. And there on that high mountain, Jesus was transfigured by God right before their very eyes- he was lit up in dazzling white, a sign of the lifting of the veil between heaven and earth. One of my colleagues said that she once titled a Transfiguration sermon, “Disco Jesus,” but I digress. “NOW- Jesus’ disciples saw him differently, no longer the one with whom they broke bread, laughed, and served. But a vision: the glory of God made visible” (Diana Butler Bass, *The Cottage*). The disciples had witnessed the deeds of Jesus but failed to grasp his full identity and mission as the Son of God. Due to what they saw, Peter, didn’t know what to say. He somehow finds some words and says how good it is to be there. It’s so good that Peter wants to make three permanent dwellings or shrines- one for Jesus, Moses and Elijah- all important figures of faith and all who

have encountered God on a mountain. It is oh so tempting to remain...to linger where everything is dazzling and clear (Jan Richardson, *Dazzling*).

Faced with the possibility of suffering, Peter wants to freeze this moment when Jesus is filled with God's glory as well as to hold onto Moses and Elijah. These "thin place" or mountain top experiences are essential to our faith. Yet, we all have to come down the mountain and enter the suffering world; we have to enter the ordinary. But most of us don't want to enter back into the pain and suffering of our world. Isn't it interesting that glowing Jesus didn't scare the disciples? It was God's voice from the cloud that overcame them with fear. Just as Peter wants to settle into this glimpse of heaven, a cloud overshadows them, interrupts Peter, and a voice says, "This is my Son, the Beloved" (17:5b). We've heard this divine voice and this line verbatim before when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (3:17). Here God says the same thing with one little addition. And it's a doozie. "Listen to him." "Apocalyptic visions give you a lot to see, but this one gives you something it really wants each of us and the three disciples to hear: 'Listen to him'" (Jacobsen). For the first and only time in Matthew's Gospel, God orders Jesus' disciples to listen to his Beloved Son. Listen to Jesus, who is not only the supreme teacher and prophet but God's Beloved Son: the Messiah, the Savior of God's people! "Listen to him!" This is an exhortation to risky discipleship. Just as Jesus has been commissioned to a ministry where suffering is necessary (16:21-28), so have his followers. Notice that when the disciples are overwhelmed with fear, Matthew captures something different from Mark and Luke's version of this story. Matthew reports that Jesus touched them. Jesus comforts

them and calms their fears. And then Jesus gives them some mountaintop parting words: “Get up and do not be afraid” (v. 7b). Then the disciples looked around and saw no one with them anymore- only Jesus. Only Jesus. Only Emmanuel. God with us. Only Jesus, who later in Matthew’s gospel- after his resurrection- stands on another mountain and commissions them with four big verbs: go, make, baptize, and teach. And Jesus promises his disciples that he will be with them “to the end of the age” (28:19-20). As humans, when we make promises such as “I’ll follow Jesus forever,” we sometimes break them, especially when we don’t want to walk the road to the cross or listen to Jesus. However, when the Son of God makes a promise, he will never break it. And then Jesus asks them not to tell anyone what they’ve seen until after his resurrection. Can you say whiplash for the three disciples as they go from seeing to being told to listen to being told not to tell anyone what they had seen until after Jesus’ resurrection?! The man they thought they knew pretty well after three years of doing ministry together was “suddenly more, suddenly Other” (Thomas).

No disrespect to the band, Third Day, or the writer of the lyrics of the song Charles sung before this sermon, yet I disagree with the phrase, “I won’t settle for ordinary things.” I understand the sentiment behind it, but I disagree because it is most often in the ordinary- in the valleys- that we hear, we see Jesus- way more than on the mountaintop! I mean Peter, James and John, as it turns out, aren’t made for unending Transfigurations. They can’t handle too much of the spectacular. All they can actually take of God’s glory is a tender touch of another human

being on their shoulders, and a reassuringly human voice in their ears” (Thomas). “One of the many challenges with a “God on the mountaintop” version of Christianity is that it prompts us to carve up and compartmentalize our lives. To separate ‘sacred’ from ‘secular.’ The mountain from the valley. The spectacular from the mundane. As if God is somehow more present during a rousing worship set, a stirring sermon, or a silent retreat in a seaside monastery, than God is when we’re doing laundry, returning a library book, or eating a meal. In its worst iteration, mountaintop Christianity is addictive, such that we spend our days pursuing a ‘high’ we conflate with spiritual success. When we don’t experience that high, we feel empty, unloved, angry, or bored. Meanwhile, we don’t notice the ever-present God in whom we actually live and move and have our being. Desperate for the mountain, we miss the God of the valley, the conference room, the school yard, the grocery store, the street corner” (Thomas). Friends, whenever we think we have figured God out or think we can put go in a tent or box, it’s good to be reminded that we’re wrong. “Whenever we grow complacent, self-righteous, or lazy in our lives of faith, it’s good to be brought to our knees by a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts and whose ways are not our ways” (Thomas).

When we listen to God through Jesus, and follow Him, our lives are transformed. You never know where or to whom or to what action Jesus is calling you so we must listen to Him! We may not light up in bright, dazzling clothes but Christ shines in our faces in the ordinary of our lives causing others to experience Christ’s love through us. “Every once

and so often, something so touching, so incandescent, so alive transfigures the human face that it's almost beyond bearing" (Frederick Buechner, daily e-votional). I was at a retreat on Friday morning with the Housing Surge Team and one of the case managers, Von, shared a story of stopping in a store to buy a charger for a participant. The young employee approached him. He didn't ask if he could help or if he was looking for something particular. Instead he asked Von, "Why are you so joy-filled?" Von replied, "Because I have Jesus in my heart." The young man said, "I do, too!" He went on to tell Von that he rarely sees people who are joyful as most of them look really sad. Von shared about how this God moment, this moment of seeing Christ in another human being, gave him continued strength and reassurance of God's presence and work among them.

In today's Gospel story and in our everyday lives, God is constantly transforming, or rather transfiguring us, through God's power and love. If we aren't listening to Jesus, how will we know? Perhaps we need to practice listening more? The great preacher Howard Thurman once said, "The true purpose of all spiritual disciplines is to clear away whatever may block our awareness of that which is God in us" (*Disciplines of the Spirit*). Listening does not result in staying on the mountain "where the air is pure and the view is stunning. We're invited to listen to the voice of God's Word in our midst so that we follow in a way that leads to the cross" (Melinda Quivik, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Maybe we can begin by opening our hearts to what Jesus is asking of us...by opening our ears to where Jesus is leading us to follow...by

opening our hands and feet to how Jesus is meeting others' needs through us? Remember that even before Peter finished speaking, God interrupts him, covering him with a thick cloud, and tells him to listen to Jesus- "NOT to his own misconceptions about the life of faith. It's *Jesus' way*- the way of the valley, the way of the cross, the way of humility, surrender, grace, and sacrifice- that Peter" (Thomas) and we all must learn to follow. "Having seen the bright light of Epiphany, we prepare now for the long shadows of Lent. We can't know ahead of time what mountains and valleys lie ahead. We can't predict how God will speak, and in what guise Jesus may appear. But we can trust in this: whether on the brightest mountain, or in the darkest valley, Jesus abides" (Thomas). Let us follow Jesus on the road that must end on another hilltop called Golgotha. Unlike the three disciples in today's story, we know that ending and yet, we still have a hard time listening to and following Jesus. Have you decided- truly decided- to follow Jesus- even to the cross? I hope you'll join us on Wednesday at noon and next Sunday as we meet Jesus on the road to Jerusalem this Lenten season. May we all, as we seek to follow Jesus on the road, listen to him and "Get up and not be afraid!" Amen.