

Matthew 17:1–9 (NET)

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter, James, and John the brother of James, and led them privately up a high mountain. And he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. Then Moses and Elijah also appeared before them, talking with him. So Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you want, I will make three shelters—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my one dear Son, in whom I take great delight. Listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they were overwhelmed with fear and threw themselves down with their faces to the ground. But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Do not be afraid.” When they looked up, all they saw was Jesus alone.

As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, “Do not tell anyone about the vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead.”

Up One Side, Down the Other

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later. Six days after Jesus has confirmed Peter's declaration that he was the messiah, six days after Jesus has then, confusingly, told them that he must suffer and be betrayed, six days after Jesus has told his followers that to gain their life, they must lose it, he came to Peter James and John. Jesus let all these difficult teachings sink in for six days; it must have seemed a lifetime.

Is this not the experience of any who attempt to follow Jesus? There are promises of blessings, new life, good news. There is something about his person and his message that draws us to him. And yet it's confusing. For all the talk of good news, life remains difficult and harsh. Following Jesus, or trying to, doesn't seem to be a ticket to painlessness and unfettered pleasure. Life continues to deal its unkind blows. And not only that, when we listen closely to Jesus, he tells us that this is what we are to expect. In fact, many times he seems to tell us that following him will make things worse, not better. "Take up your cross and follow me," he says.

For six days after this latest round of puzzling and disappointing good news, so-called, Jesus left his disciples to lick their wounds and ponder their predicament. It must have seemed a lifetime, on the one hand, and hardly enough time, on the other hand, to even begin to grasp his meaning.

Then he came to Peter, James and John. This morning we will follow the way the early Christian writers approached the text. We will accompany them. Jesus came to Peter, James and John, and this morning we are in their shoes. He comes to us, who, also, have been wounded by life and perplexed by our faith. We are those disciples. You are those disciples. You sit in the desert sand, numb from Jesus' last bewildering pronouncements, maybe drawing meaningless circles with small stick, dull and vaguely daydreaming. He says, "Get up. Come with me."

You comply almost mechanically, without any enthusiasm. You just follow, without speaking. Silently you trek. As the day begins to warm and sun beats down, the path grows steeper. The mountains are always deceptive here. Like ocean islands on a clear day, the summits appear near and unimposing, as though you could almost reach out and hold them in your hand. Without the cover of forests you can see the very top, and it looks as though you climb it in a few minutes. But, of course, it's an illusion. The steps add up. The incline becomes steeper. The heat burns your face, and the exertion burns the muscles in your calves. And on you walk, the summit still distant, and not a word has been spoken.

At points along the way, you wonder why you are even doing this. And this 'this' you are thinking about isn't just this day going up the mountain; it's this whole thing. Why did I leave fishing on the Sea of Galilee? Why did I follow after this inscrutable man? A lot of people said he was crazy, and that we were crazy for chasing after him. Maybe they were right. But something, maybe it's simply inertia, keeps you putting one foot in front of the other, climbing, sweating, aching in the blazing heat.

But it's not just inertia that propels you. For whatever reason, it's as though there's no choice, that the alternative, the return the old places and ways is unthinkable. This is the only

chance, or dare you say it, the only hope. You left the fishnets because there was disquiet in your soul. Every day the same question kept invading your mind. Is all there is? You're born; you fish; you die? Is that it? When he stood on the shore that day and told you to drop your nets and come, it didn't really make any sense, or at least in one way it didn't. But there was something about him that said, "No. This is not all there is." And though he said almost nothing, his claim to have the answer seemed to echo across the lake, "No, this is not all there is. Come, follow me."

Well, that was a long time ago. It all seems a lot less certain now. But you put one foot in front of another because the idea of going back and concluding that there is no more to life but birth, work and death is just too excruciating to accept. And you put one foot in front of another because this enigmatic man you are following still has an allure you can neither explain nor refuse.

Lost in these thoughts you hardly notice that the summit lies just before you. You traverse the last section and arrive, aware that nothing has been said, nor has anything happened, and if it's going to it will have to be soon. Surely we didn't climb all this way just to walk down the other side, you say to yourself. You look out over the 360 degree view, conscious that it's the first time since you began walking that you've even looked beyond your feet.

Then out of the corner of your eye you catch a flash of light. You turn to see; there he is glowing light emanating from him. Artists through the ages have tried to capture what you see, but you realize that their paintings are meager approximations. How do you capture the emanating glory of God with paint and canvas? And so, too, has it been with the words the theologians and poets; they, too, have sought to describe what you see. But their words were meager, also.

And yet, it's there before you, visible, perfectly recognizable, giving no doubt. Without question that for which you left the nets and boats behind is before you, the glory of God. It's as John Chrysostom wrote, he has opened a little of his deity and showed you the divinity within.¹ As you sense the divinity inside him, an unexpected thing happens. Inside of you has become different, too. You have laid eyes on the transcendent. You have climbed the mountain to its loftiest heights. You have seen that for which you have for so long longed, as Origen said it, you have seen the Spirit of God. And you know that you will never be quite the same.

You offer to build huts, dwellings, for Jesus and Moses and Elijah, who have joined him. You're not sure why you said that. But it has something to do with having arrived at the place, having encountered the light and mystery of God. Are the huts to be permanent dwellings? Are they for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, or are they for you? It's a fair question. Who wouldn't want to live permanently in the glory of God? And as if to confirm your thoughts, out of the cloud and light there comes a voice. You have heard something like it before, down at the Jordan when he was baptized. "This is my one dear Son, in whom I take great delight. Listen to him!" Your knees wobble. You lower yourself to the ground trembling with awe; you bury your face in your hands against the earth. A few hours before you were drawing lazy, meaningless circles in the sand, and now your face is pressed to the earth in stunned wonder.

Suddenly, it all goes quiet. You haven't even been aware that there was noise, like when the refrigerator stops running, and only then do you notice it. You are aware that there had been something electric in the air, and now there is silence. And you hear his voice. "Get up. Do not

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: a Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 401.

be afraid.” And when you look up, not only is it eerily silent, but the light, Elijah and Moses, they’re all gone. It’s just him and the three of you in your sweat-stained clothes and sore feet. That’s it.

As you fight to get your bearings, he says, “Don’t tell anybody about this for now.” Well, what would you say, anyway? You can’t actually describe it any better than history’s painters and poets. It’s beyond words and paint. And more than that, worse than that, it’s gone, like drifting smoke that dissipates and leaves not a trace. Things have reverted back to where they were. What would you tell them? And where would you tell them it went?

But just as your thoughts threaten to drown you in gloom, you realize that it’s not the way it was. Though the scene has reverted, and the glory of God no longer blazes in light, it has left in you an unmistakable residue. You have glimpsed the glory of God, and its presence, even in its absence, is detectable within you.

A sudden double-edged reality comes clear to you. You cannot stay here resting in the mystery and glory of God. Indeed, it no longer exists as it did in that moment, when it overshadowed everything else, when it was all there was. Your tired, aching body is back, and the blinding light is gone. But the other edge of this double-edged reality is that it has left its mark on you. It has changed you.

He calls you down the mountain. You, along with Jesus, go down the mountain, back into things the way they were. But they won’t be quite the way they were. Leo the great said that on the mountain you were strengthened to better withstand the life’s enigmas and troubles, and life’s complexities and perplexities. The question: “Is this all there is?” will not plague you in the way it did before. Oh sure, like Peter, you’ll forget and have to remind yourself. You’ll even deny you know the glory of God when the world’s pressures mount, and you will weep with remorse, probably many times. But the transformation in you will never be completely undone.

In the face of the glory of God on the mountain you said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here.” You weren’t aware, perhaps, of all the ways that was true. It was surely good for you, who are forever changed. But, now, it must become better for a wider circle. There were but a few of you on the mountain today. Nine other disciples and hundreds upon hundreds of others were not there.

Augustine of Hippo once write in a sermon, “Come down, Peter! ... Proclaim the word! Keep at it in season and out of season. Convict. Admonish... Work. Perspire. Endure... Come down in order to work on earth, to serve on earth.”² You have encountered the mystery and glory of God today, up on the mountain. But just as God became flesh, just as God came among us, Emmanuel, to serve and transform the world, so are you enlisted into that undertaking, to reenter the world. For reasons you and I may not fully understand God has given us this broken existence within which to witness to the glory and mystery of God, to love and serve all God’s children. Maybe, just maybe, the key to the puzzle lies there. The answer to the question, “Is this all there is to life?” cannot ultimately be merely personal. It is also a question we ask on behalf of all God’s creatures and creation itself. Maybe the glory of God cannot exist except as it is shared with one another. Maybe if, as Augustine urges us, we come down and proclaim and live the glory of God, enduring and perspiring, just maybe, one day, the glory and mystery of God may be on full display from the highest mountain tops to the deepest valleys. Just maybe, on that day the glory and mystery of God will shine forth in every space and remain ablaze forevermore. Amen.

² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: a Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 403.