

It Is Good To Be Here

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Lesson: Matthew 17:1-5

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!”

Today’s text is full of mystery and wonder. For those of us who are linear in our thinking and like most things in black and white, this text is perplexing and probably not one of our go to texts. But perhaps it should be. Because if we are drawn to certainty, predictability, and processes that lead to logical conclusions we are frequently disappointed, because others don’t see it our way. This text encourages us to sit with the mystery, and trust the uncertainty of it all.

The gospel writer wrote that Jesus wanted his trusted inner circle of friends to accompany him on this mountain journey. I get that, you don’t want just anybody to go with you when a God thing is about to take place. You want those folks who know God is real to take that journey with you.

When they got to that special place, the first thing the disciples saw was a change in Jesus’ appearance. His face glowed and his clothing appeared to be brilliant white. Peter, James and John were mesmerized and ecstatic about witnessing this mountain experience complete with giants of the faith—Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. The disciples said, it is good to be here.

When I was in high school I went to weekend Christian camps and week long Christian conferences. I was in heaven while there. I was surrounded by people who had a personal

relationship with Jesus and were not afraid to let others know. People were kind and playful. There were hours of singing, praying, and learning the scriptures. For a budding evangelist, I had found my happy place and never wanted to leave. I was in the midst of a mountain top experience. I was changed. I saw life differently. My heart was open and my spirit soared. I was transformed and wanted to stay on that mountain. It was good to be there.

I'm sure you have had mountain top experiences too. Perhaps you were on that dream cruise or honeymoon. Or you and your girlfriends went on a once in a lifetime trip through Europe. Or, perhaps your mountain top experience was the birth of your baby girl or baby boy. In that moment, life stood still and was as close to perfect a you could imagine. Joy, unspeakable joy oozed from every pore. And, you were changed! You were kinder, calmer, and funnier. You could have stayed in that holy space forever, but we cannot stay on the mountain. We have to go back and be with the people. Aaah, it was good to be there.

The Hebrew bible lectionary text this week is of Moses going up the mountain to receive the holy commandments from God. It took Moses a really long time to receive the sacred texts and those waiting for him at base camp got in a heap of trouble because it took him so long to get back. Those waiting made up their own rules and created their own god to worship. Although Moses experienced the majesty of God on the mountain, he couldn't stay there. His people needed him. He had to go back and share the message God had given him.

When Moses returned his face glowed so that he had to wear a veil so others would not be frightened by the brilliance of his countenance. While on the mountain, Moses was transformed. He was changed. It was good for him to be there.

We can't stay on our mountain tops either. We have to go back down the mountain and share the good news. We have to go back down the mountain to help and encourage others. In Dr. King's famous *I've Been to the Mountain Top* speech, on April 3, 1968 in Memphis, TN he said, "We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've

been to the mountaintop ... I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land

Dr. King made it to the mountain top and it was good to be there, but he couldn't stay there. In fact the very next day after giving this speech, he was assassinated in Memphis advocating for the rights of sanitation workers. So while we may want to stay on the mountain, the work of proclaiming the gospel is in the valley.

Peter, James, and John saw Jesus change before their very eyes. They had never experienced anything like that and there were no words to describe it. Frequently, when we are in the place of Divine awe there are no words.

While traveling in Alaska and seeing the Alaska Mountain Range and Denali soar over 20,000 feet high, I was in awe of the beauty of nature and there were no words to describe it. No selfie would do it justice. All I could do was cry and sing:

O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder,
Consider all the world thy hands have made,
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed
Then sings my soul my savior God to Thee
How great thou art, how great thou art

The disciples didn't know what to do. After witnessing Jesus' change before their very eyes, and seeing him chit-chatting with Moses and Elijah, they were undone. What do we do when we've been on the mountain top? What do we do when we experience the presence of God in ways no words can describe?

Well, the disciples thought they could build a monument! They wanted to build three little houses—one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. You know buildings are fine, but

sometimes they become traps. Sometimes we end up worshipping the image, or the mountain, or the monument, or the building, instead of worshipping the God of the universe.

Too often struggling congregations put more energy into maintaining their buildings and structures and forget to share the love of Jesus with the neighbors. Following the way of Jesus is not about learning to build taller buildings, or chiseling stone monuments. The way of Jesus, welcomes the stranger, feeds the hungry, heals the sick, clothes the naked, cares for creation, and frees those wrongly imprisoned.

In April 2019, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, went up in smoke. Yes, it was a tragic loss of a majestic edifice. Yes, the art world and architectural world lost an icon that may not be restored. But, while a tragic material loss, the congregation remains. The majesty of God remains. God did not go up in smoke, just the cathedral. Our God is alive! Let's not get it twisted!

You will notice that Jesus didn't even bother to comment on the new building plans the disciples were dreaming up. While Peter was explaining the blue prints, the disciples got caught up in the cloud themselves. Peter, James, and John became part of the transfiguration and out of the bright cloud that surrounded them a voice said, **This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!**"

Listen, listen, listen. Stop talking and listen. You know when we don't know what to do, a good place to start is to listen to and listen for the Spirit. If we are honest, we probably have more times of not knowing and uncertainty than we have moments of sheer clarity. In those in between times, we can listen for God's voice and direction.

My favorite liturgical season is Lent. It is the time for me to work on my relationship with God and to be honest about my shortcomings and turn toward love. I am particularly drawn to the last day of Lent, Holy Saturday. Good Friday is over. Remembering the pain and agony of Jesus'

death is behind me, but Easter has not yet arrived. The party is close and I can taste it. On holy Saturday I make preparations for what will be, but it is not yet. That is what transfiguration is about. It is living in the in between space of knowing God will make a way somehow, but not knowing how God is going to do it.

Politically we are in that in between time. Waiting for the November elections to be over, yet knowing there is so much work ahead before we have resolution. But while we are waiting, the least we can do is VOTE!

The task at hand while in the place of transfiguration is learning to see with eyes of faith, and hear with ears of hope, and live with hearts filled with love. It is trusting that if I don't get the whole picture of God's plan, you just might have the missing piece to the puzzle. We have to work together, not so much to build more things, but to help transform more lives and bring more peace, more love, and more justice into the world. Yes, it is good to be here and we are called to be partners in Christ service. We can work together.

May we learn the art of sharing side by side and friend with friends,
Equal partners in our caring to fulfill God's chosen end.
Yes, my sisters and brothers, it is good to be here. Amen.