“This Sermon Brought to You by Tide”

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Exodus 24:12-18

Matthew 17:1-9

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Things happen on mountains. Strange things. Miraculous things. In the Bible, when someone goes up a mountain, you better stop and pay attention. Something’s about to happen. We’ve seen it before — like in today’s Old Testament text when Moses goes up to Mount Sinai and returns with the Law, or when Elijah has an epic mountain showdown on Mount Carmel between the prophets of Baal and himself. And then there’s that super-climactic moment when Abraham, following God’s order, walks his son, Isaac, up to Mount Moriah to sacrifice him. Miraculous things happen on mountains. And strange ones.

Today’s New Testament text is no different. In fact, today’s text might just take the cake when it comes to epic Biblical mountaintop experiences. Peter, James, and John follow Jesus up to a high mountain, perhaps just to be by themselves. All of a sudden, Jesus is transfigured — his face shines like the sun and his clothes are dazzling white. And then out of nowhere, Moses and Elijah appear.

When we examined this text in Bible study on Monday, I wondered aloud about how the disciples *knew* it was Moses and Elijah. Someone else in the class said they must have been wearing name tags, which means that if name tags are good enough for Moses and Elijah, they’re good enough for Covenant. But I digress.

Moses and Elijah appear and begin to have a conversation with Jesus, which must have been super awkward for Peter, James, and John — for them to just stand there and try to take in this incredible sight, while Moses and Elijah and Jesus exclude them from their conversation.

And perhaps Peter feels a little awkward. Because he’s the one who asks if maybe if he should build some dwellings for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah.

There’s some speculation about why exactly Peter makes this suggestion. Is it because he thinks they’ll be up there a while? Could it be that Peter is suggesting the need for the comfort and safety of shelter? Or maybe it’s a reference to the Festival of Booths and Peter is attempting to build the shelters typically used at Sukkot. But perhaps, Peter is saying, “This is really great. Let’s stay up here. Forever.”

Staying up there forever is obviously not an option for this group of men who are on a literal mission from God. So why would Peter ever suggest something like that?

This passage comes right after Peter makes the great proclamation to Jesus: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And then Jesus blesses Peter and announces that Peter is the rock upon whom he will build the church.

And *then* Jesus tells the disciples about the suffering that he will go through in Jerusalem and his subsequent death and resurrection.

And *then* Peter says that he’d never let Jesus be handed over or killed.

And *then* Jesus rebukes Peter and tells Satan to get behind him and calls Peter a stumbling block. The same Peter, who, just a few verses ago was a rock for Jesus.

*And then* Jesus tells his disciples that they must lose their lives in order to save them and that they should take up their crosses and follow Jesus.

That is a lot to process. That’s a lot of “and thens…”

Today’s text takes place six days after all of those “and then” events occurred. For six days, Peter and the disciples have been mulling Jesus’s words over in their heads. For six nights, Peter has been tossing and turning in his bed. Did Jesus *really* mean that he was going to die…and be resurrected? Did he *really* mean that I am going to help start this new church? Am I *really* supposed to give my life for this movement??

I don’t blame Peter if part of his motivation for offering to build the dwellings was to stay on that mountaintop for as long as possible with his disciple-friends and with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, and at the same time possibly avoid the realities that might confront them if they ever come down from the mountain. I don’t blame him if he’s saying to everyone on that mountain, “This is really great. Let’s stay up here. Forever.”

Who wouldn't want to stay on that mountaintop?

I have had many mountaintop experiences throughout my life. The most obvious ones that come to mind are my many trips as a youth, a young adult, and eventually as a campus minister to Montreat - our denomination’s conference center in the North Carolina mountains.

When you’re in Montreat, you often hear it described as one of those “thin spaces,” meaning, the air is thinner there and so you maybe feel a little closer to Heaven, a little closer to God. I mean, it *is* in North Carolina and nothing could be finer…

A commentary that I read this week describes mountains as the point where “human nature meets God: the meeting place of the temporal and the eternal.”[[1]](#footnote-2) And when I’m in those beautiful Appalachian Mountains, I *do* feel closer to God. I *do* feel like I’m in that meeting place of the temporal and the eternal. Special things happen in those mountains, too.

When I was a teacher in Durham, I spent my Sunday evenings at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill as one of their youth advisors. Each summer University Pres. sends their youth up the mountain to Montreat to have mountaintop experiences of their own. The high school students stay for two weeks straight — attending the youth conference for a week and then the Music and Worship conference the following week. It is two weeks filled with laughter, fellowship, music, and Bible study. Even though I had a shorter summer break because I was working at a year-round school at the time, I never had any problem giving up two weeks of my short summer to spend with those high schoolers. In fact, they were two of my favorite weeks all year … which made the summer that I came down with a nasty sinus infection especially awful. Having a sinus infection is never fun. Having it in Montreat is just cruel. I was so bummed.

I remember one day, I arrived early for mid-day worship in Anderson Auditorium and I sat in a pew and just started crying. I don’t know why I was crying. I didn’t have a particular *reason*. I just knew that I felt awful and apparently my body figured now would be a good time to add another ridiculous symptom — unexplained tears — to the mix.

When the youth came into the auditorium that day, a student named Angie sat next to me and saw that I was in pretty bad shape. She asked me how I was and I just kind of shrugged. She gave me a hug and continued to sit with me during the service. That afternoon, the students and youth advisors all hiked Lookout Mountain. Except for me. I was passed out on a couch, surrounded by Kleenex. I woke up just as the students came back. Angie came and sat next to me and handed me a rock. She told me that she felt bad that I couldn’t go up the mountain, so instead, she was bringing a piece of the mountain to me. She’d climbed up to the top of Lookout and looked around for a good rock, and returned with that one. She’d shared the mountain with me. That rock has traveled with me to seminary, to Memphis, and now, it sits on my dresser in Staunton. I love having that piece of the mountain with me.

That mountaintop experience that Peter, James, and John had with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, needed to be shared. After Peter asks to build the dwellings, and after Moses and Elijah disappear, Jesus tells the three disciples, “Get up and do not be afraid,” and they begin their journey back down the mountain.

Where Peter wanted to contain Christ’s glory on that mountaintop, Jesus knew that the experience had to be taken down the mountain and shared. If Jesus had agreed to let Peter build the booths, the people would have had to go *up* to the mountain to experience this revelation from God. Instead, Jesus sends them down to bring the mountain to them. Down into the places that needed to witness God’s glory more than any place else.

In his own mountaintop speech, Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed a crowd at the Church of God headquarters in Memphis, TN, just one day before his death. He talked about the need to come down from the mountaintop and bring God’s love to the people. He wrote, “It's all right to talk about long white robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism. But ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here! It's all right to talk about "streets flowing with milk and honey," but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can't eat three square meals a day.

It's all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God's preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis, Tennessee. This is what we have to do.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

King calls us to live into a duality of hope for the future, but doing the hard work of loving God’s people here, today. He is calling us to take these visions of God’s bright love and shine a light in the darkness today. One commentary writer described this going to-and-fro from the mountaintop to the places of suffering as a “movement from vision to witness, from glory to suffering, suffering to vision, and back again.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Mountaintop experiences like those of Peter, James, and John offer wonderful visions of God’s transcendent love. They witness to God’s magnitude. This scene is full of some spectacular imagery — Jesus’s shining face and bleached-white clothes, appearances of prophets long gone, God’s voice breaking through, proclaiming Jesus to be God’s Son, the Beloved. Listen to him! No wonder the disciples immediately fall down to their faces, afraid to look up at the marvels before them. And, no wonder the disciples leave from this experience ready to follow Jesus wherever he goes next — even if it’s to Jerusalem and to the cross.

My hunch is that not all of us have had an experience exactly like this. Not all of us have had God’s glory revealed to us in such a magnificent way, that we are left speechless, our bodies lying prostrate on the ground. But my hunch is that we’ve witnessed God’s transcendent love nonetheless.

Maybe it was on a mission trip or working with Renewing Homes. Or maybe it was at the Boys and Girls club, helping the students build their own Christmas display for Gypsy Hill Park. Or maybe it was in a Monday morning Bible study, when a familiar story brought new insights. Or maybe you witnessed God’s transcendent love in the form of a holy casserole, delivered to your door after the birth of baby or the loss of a loved one.

My hunch is you’ve had your own mountaintop experiences — but instead of a mountain, it was a soup kitchen, a middle school classroom, or *maybe* even at a session or committee meeting. My hunch is that even without transfiguration-level experiences, you’ve managed to find one of those thin spaces — where the temporal and the eternal meet.

And once we’ve witnessed that transcendent love, that love that transforms us so completely, that there is no going back to our old ways, it’s our job to take it down from the mountain and share it with others so that they might witness that love for themselves.

Joe Harvard, a minister from Durham, wrote about today’s text saying, “When your eyes are opened to God’s good future, then you cannot go back. However, you can go back down the path to be a healing presence to those who are hurting, to work for justice and peace, and to offer hope. People are hungry to experience this good news.”[[4]](#footnote-5)

How will you share the good news with someone? How will you invite someone to stand in those thin places alongside you, so that they might experience God’s love in an entirely new way? As we’ve heard it said many times, an invitation like that is all that simple and it is all that hard. But know this, Jesus didn’t send the disciples down from that mountain by themselves, he walked alongside them.

And Christ will walk alongside you, every step of your journey, so that you might have the courage to bring a piece of the mountain to God’s people as well. So that they might also have a glimpse of God’s transformational love made manifest in Jesus Christ. And Joe was right. “When your eyes are opened to God’s good future, you cannot to back.” Go forward, my friends.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)