**Holy Ground**

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February 11, 2024

Texts: Psalm 50:1-6; Mark 9:2-9

It’s tempting to poke fun at Peter in this story. He goes up on the mountain with Jesus and James and John and while they are there, Jesus is transfigured. Somehow, his clothes become dazzling white. And his appearance changes so that the divinity inside is crystal clear on the outside. And then, as if that’s not amazing enough, Moses and Elijah show up. The disciples watch as Jesus has a conversation with these ancestors of the faith. While the other two are standing in awe and wonder, Peter says, “Hey Jesus, I could build you a tent, if you’d like. Three of them. One for you…one for Elijah…one for Moses. We can set up camp here. I know you just said that thing about the suffering and the dying and all that, but, um, what about building some tabernacles? Yeah?”

This is quintessential Peter - always impulsive, always talking…it’s never a dull moment with Peter. He tries so hard to get it right. Only a chapter ago, Jesus asked the disciples who they thought Jesus was. And Peter, he spoke up, “You are the Messiah!” Gold star, Peter, you’ve got this. And then almost immediately, when Jesus tells the disciples that he will suffer at the hands of the political and religious leaders and be killed, Peter shushes him and is firmly rebuked because he still doesn’t really get it. Now he’s up on the mountain and seeing Jesus in all his glory, he says the first thing that pops into his head…let’s build a couple of tents and keep you here.

Silly Peter, you say. But, really, if it happened to you, wouldn’t you do the same thing? Wouldn’t you want to put a bubble around this perfect moment and set up camp? Stay there and protect Jesus from the bad stuff waiting at the bottom of the mountain. Stay there with Jesus on what is certainly holy ground.

See, for Peter, down that mountain was the promise of hurt and loss and grief. Peter doesn’t really understand it all yet, but he knows that his friend, his teacher, says that he’s going to suffer and be killed. And, honestly, Jesus doesn’t paint an easy picture for the disciples’ future either. And even without all of this, life at the bottom of the mountain is just really hard. So, Jesus, yes, let’s just stay here in the light of the transfiguration, he says.

And I get it. We stand here, you and me, facing the beginning of Lent this week. How many of you would rather hang out here in this bright, shiny story than venture into Ash Wednesday to be reminded of your own mortality? As if we really need to be reminded of our own mortality. Or walk the heart-wrenching journey to the cross, six weeks of Lent, reminding us of the pain and violence and death suffered by our Lord. And a reminder of the injustice and violence and pain that still plagues the world at the bottom of the mountain and asks us to consider our complicity in it. Maybe we can understand Peter better than we’d like.

It’s tempting to poke fun at Peter. Peter, whose bright idea is to build a tent and put Jesus in it. Confronted with the full glory of Jesus, Peter’s first thought is to contain it.

I’m reminded of a song that became popular in youth group around the time I was in middle school. It was a catchy little tune with a disturbing theology. See, it went like this:

*I wish I had a little white box to put my Jesus in.*

*I'd take him out and kiss, kiss, kiss and put Him back again.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

As if Jesus was something we could store away and pull out when we needed him. As if Jesus, who is the most out-of-the-box human there ever was could fit in any box humanity ever made.

But we try.

For some people, it’s the church building that becomes the box we put our Jesus in. Jesus is in the church building, ready when we need him. We come on Sundays to visit. But Mondays through Saturdays are different – work and world keep us busy. Neatly compartmentalized. We know this is holy ground, a special place for encounter. You can come to the church and have a moment of transformation with God. You can find Jesus here…if you come here. This is the holy ground. As if Jesus could ever be contained in a monument.

Sometimes it’s the church body that becomes the box we put our Jesus in. In order to keep Jesus safe, to keep ourselves safe, the church works to keep out the people the church has decided tarnish the image of God. This happens when the church decides who deserves to be here or simply fails to be a space where someone who looks different, sounds different, moves differently, loves different, lives differently can’t find welcome because words and spaces are limiting or downright cruel. We’ll keep Jesus pure and holy in our box. And you can be there…if you’re good enough, right enough, if you fit in our box. I heard this so many times when I interacted with the college students…they yearned for the love I talked about, but feared the community that formed the walls around Jesus. So many churches had loudly proclaimed them unworthy of being on holy ground because of sexuality, gender, lack of knowledge, or past choices that the church deemed unholy. As if Jesus needed to us to protect him.

For some, it’s the definition of God that becomes the box we put our Jesus in. We limit what God can be to what makes us comfortable. We resist leaning into the wonder and awe in the stories we can’t explain, getting stuck in our academic brains when confronted with the great mystery of faith. We grow uncomfortable with the things Jesus does that bother our sensibilities. We see this in the rash of pastors who recently came under attack by their congregations for being too progressive when the words they were saying were not their own – but Jesus’s own – preaching radical hospitality and beloved expansive community. We don’t want to grapple with the fullness of the gospel that challenges our way of life or human understanding. As if Jesus could be made more sensibly human and less wildly divine.

We’re trying to shove in a box the most out-of-the-box person there ever was.

This is the beauty of the transfiguration story. After a whole season of Epiphany, a liturgical season dedicated to trying to figure out who this healing, teaching, miracle-working man really is, we always end up here on the mountain. We’ve seen the amazing things he does. And here on the mountaintop, we see who he is. We see his divinity shine through. In case we missed it. We are invited into the wonder, the possible impossibilities he offers. One more chance to know fully know him before we start the hard journey to the cross with him.

We are invited to stand with Peter as he is privy to the clearest example of Christ’s divinity. This is the moment where who Jesus is on the inside is made clear by how he looks on the outside. Peter is getting a look at the real Jesus in all of his glory, light shining forth and bright shining clothes and blinding beauty bursting out of every pore of his human form. And Peter’s answer, oh, okay, so you need a slightly bigger box. Peter! For heaven’s sake.

It’s tempting to poke fun at Peter. But we do the same thing too. We push back at this story of wonder. We try to make it make sense. But that’s the point. It doesn’t make sense because Jesus isn’t only human, he’s also divine. And he breaks every box we try to cram him in.

So the sky opens and cloud engulfs Peter and James and John and the voice of God thunders, “This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” We can hear this as a reprimand…you better listen to him! Or as an invitation…listen to him, trust him.

What does it mean to listen to Jesus? I think it means to hear that this is man who will never fit into our human understanding and we ought to lean into the wonder he offers. The possibilities that break down all the borders and defy all reason. To imagine what could be if the light of Jesus transfigured on that mountaintop were allowed to expand into the world, shining into the corners where humanity has let the darkness linger.

If we listen to him, we hear him go out and make holy space everywhere. He goes to where the people are hurting. He goes and finds the people who need him. His miracles don’t require people to come to his holy ground – he makes it where they are. What would it look like for the church to be like that – to go to the places with the people and make church there – at the missions, at the street corners, at the colleges, at the coffee shops?

If we listen to him, we hear him give second chances, value the small things that grow big, invite the least to sit in equal partnership with the most powerful, to love the people others are quick to dismiss. What would it look like for the church to be like that? To become partners with the poor, not just giving them supplies but building friendships, listening to their stories. To build spaces that speak to the diversity of human expression with carefully chosen words and inclusive spaces? How could we build spaces that embrace, include, and empower because all are needed here?

If we listen to him, we hear him turn ordinary dinners into epiphanies, bedside visits into resurrection events, and blankets on the ground into holy meals. Where can we be challenged to set a space for Jesus at our tables and find holy ground in the mundane moments of our lives?

If we listen to him, we hear his steady breathing, still there when the cloud lifted and Elijah and Moses had gone away, still there as they head down the mountain together.

This is the grace that is offered to the disciples on that mountain and is offered to us too. You can’t put Jesus in a box…he won’t fit. But you can go down that mountain and out into the world with courage. You can listen to him and discern where you are called to reflect the light. Because Jesus’s light can’t be contained. Rather, he illuminates us in his light as we move with him at our side. If we will just listen and lean into the wonder and wonderful hope he offers the world.

1. “DLTK's Bible Songs for Kids,” DLTK’s Sites for Kids, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.dltk-kids.com/bible/little_white_box.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)