

"Mountaintop Moments"

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First Presbyterian Church
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Exodus 24:12-18

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – Matthew 17:1-9

When Joy Young and I were discussing favorite Bible passages with the current Tuxis confirmation class a week ago last Wednesday, of course they asked their pastor what his favorite is. “The one in Matthew 6 about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field,” I said. “It reminds me of how God takes care of our needs, and that our needs are really so simple and basic.”

Then, this week I read the following words by Wendell Berry from his book, “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community.” “Whoever really, has considered the lilies of the field or the birds of the air, and pondered the improbability of their existence in this warm world within the cold and empty stellar distances, (that person) will hardly balk at the turning of water into wine – which was, after all, a very small miracle. We forget the greater and still continuing miracle by which water (with soil and sunlight) is turned into grapes.”

With that, Berry has taken my example of life’s simple needs and exploded it into a cosmic mystery. He invites us to step outside the confines of everyday life and into the sacred spaces hidden all around us – like this sacred space before us here today that holds bread and juice, the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“What the Bible might mean,” says Berry, “or how it could mean anything, in a closed, air-conditioned building, I do not know... I know that holiness cannot be confined. When you think you have captured it, it has already escaped; only its poor, pale ashes are left. It is after this foolish capture and the inevitable escape,” says Berry, “that you get translations of the Bible that read like a newspaper”.

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves.” Thus begins Matthew’s chronicle of a day in the life of Jesus. An ordinary day; it began like any other day, and while Jesus’ days were peppered with miracles – water into wine, healings of sight, speech, body and soul, even raisings from the dead, the disciples climbing a mountain with Jesus this day are about to witness the greatest miracle yet – a greater spectacle still than even the spirit descending at Jesus’ baptism. For atop the mountain, God speaks to his disciples. “From the cloud a voice (says to them and to us), ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!’” Hearing this, the disciples fall to the ground and are overcome by fear.

Atop the mountain, God speaks to his disciples, Peter, James and John and to us. God reveals the majesty of Jesus – ablaze in dazzling white clothes and a face that shines like the sun – Jesus, Moses and Elijah standing together, and Jesus standing above them all, the Son of God.

But Peter doesn't see it that way at first. At first, Peter's all a rush to honor the three prophets equally, build three dwellings on the mountain, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. This, despite Peter's assertion just six days earlier (in Matthew 16) when Jesus asks the disciples, "... Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

With feet firmly planted on the ground and gathered with all the disciples, Peter takes that leap of faith in anticipation of what only God can reveal, a leap of faith that brings blessing upon him. "Blessed are you...", says Jesus (those 6 days earlier). "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." On the ground surrounded by all the disciples, Peter embraces Jesus as the Messiah. And six days later, atop the mountain and in the thralls of a heavenly vision, he forgets what his heart had shown him and places Jesus on equal standing with the prophets of old.

Typically we think of mountaintop moments as the truest, most enlightening experiences we can have. But here, we see that though they may lead to new visions and insights, it is on the ground where mountaintop experiences get their real traction. Our trouble is getting our feet on the ground while holding onto – and acting upon – the new visions or insights God gives us when we've entered into those sacred spaces.

Each year the senior high youth take a trip to Estes Park, Colorado, where they gather with LOGOS groups from around the country. One evening last year, each church group got up and talked about what they do in their communities. "After they talked about doing more things locally," said Ellie Esry, one of our senior highs, "that made me want to start working at Harvesters. I feel it would be a really good mission's thing to do."

This is the vision and insight that these young people are bringing back from that particular mountaintop moment – a desire to do local missions. And Donna as Youth Director is looking into helping them make that happen, helping them to get their feet on the ground while holding onto the vision God showed them atop a mountain in Colorado.

Jesus gives us a four-step method for bringing our visions and insights down the mountain and into our everyday lives – whether it's the vision of the youth to do local missions, this church's commitment to reach out to new people in new ways, or your own desire to put into action whatever it is that God has placed on your heart in recent weeks, or perhaps years and years ago.

After God showed Peter, James and John the vision of Jesus transfigured as divine light personified, these three were overcome by fear. Sometimes we can't take it all in, can't fully grasp, that what God is showing us is possible in life. It's just too much to imagine. And yet often the actions that are needed to bring a vision to reality are not all that complicated.

An auto mechanic received a repair order that said, "check clunking noise when going around corners." So he took the car out for a test drive and made two right turns, and each time – sure enough – he heard a loud clunking noise. Back at the shop, he returned the car to the service manager with this note: "Removed bowling ball from trunk." The owner of the car was afraid something was terribly wrong. And in the midst of that fear, he couldn't see how simply

looking around at what was right in front of him could lead to a solution, solve a problem through something so simple.

When Peter, James and John were gripped by fear, “Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” The first of the four-step method to bring a vision or insight from the mountaintop into our everyday lives is “to get up.” To move from the physical or spiritual position we're put in when gripped by fear or awe or overwhelm in the face of something new. We need to resist the instinct to stay bowed down, closed off, curled up and instead look around at what God has placed before us, that we might bring vision into reality. “When (the three disciples) looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.” This is the reality of our faith. Jesus is alongside us, both upon the mountaintop of vision and insight and upon the solid ground of day-to-day life. Jesus is the ground upon which we are to plant, nurture and raise up anything good that’s to come from our God-given vision of what’s possible.

"And with Jesus at our side, we can "get up" and not be afraid." Step 2 is to come down the mountain. Despite Peter’s desire to build three dwellings, when he says, “Lord, it is good for us to be here,” Jesus brings them back down the mountain. The ministry of Jesus Christ only happens by returning from the mountain, returning to our day-to-day lives. And then, Jesus does something startling. Instead of telling the disciples to get busy acting on what they’ve just seen, he says, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” There is a time and place for acting on our vision of what’s possible in the world. We know now that the place is here – in our everyday lives; and the time?

The time is as God ordains it. The time is when God brings forth those people and resources and events that make our God-given dreams and aspirations possible. We cannot do anything worthwhile by ourselves, and certainly not without the fullness of God’s presence and blessing.

So Step 3 after we've come down the mountain is, at first, to “tell no one,” to refrain from the type of over-exuberance that gets us ahead of ourselves; that gets everyone worked up about something new before it’s had time to settle, before we’ve had time to pray about it and seek God’s blessing upon it. If it be God’s will, God will provide the resources, the right time and place, and the partners to bring it about.

Now, while Jesus says “tell no one,” we are not to take that strictly literally, but rather we are free to quietly explore the possibility of a new undertaking with those whom God has placed in our lives, those people who are our sounding boards and partners in ministry.

And then, Step 4. Once we’ve “gotten up;” broken free from whatever is stopping us – fear, awe or overwhelm – and once we’ve brought our new vision down from the mountain and into our everyday lives, and after we’ve given time for God to bless our vision and provide for its realization, then it’s time to breathe life into that vision, to share it with the world, to tell everyone we see that, indeed, Jesus Christ “the Son of God” lives; Christ is risen and here’s the proof.

Look, here are the hands and feet of Jesus, moving and working in the world today, welcoming the stranger and the outcast, providing for the poor, healing the sick, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry. There does come a time when we are to share the good news of the gospel as we experience it, to share it with those who God would touch through us, those to whom Jesus is coming – in the body and presence of the church, in the body and presence of his faithful disciples.

When we stand firm alongside Jesus in our hearts and in our minds, in our thoughts and in our actions, Jesus actually comes alongside others. Jesus comes to those who are bowed down by fear and awe and overwhelm and “touches them,” saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And it’s at those moments when we are called to begin telling about what we’ve seen, to say to anyone who will listen, “Look, there is Jesus himself, standing before you. He’s not on some esoteric mountaintop or in some heavenly realm. He’s here, calling to you to come down from the mountain, to come up out of the valley, to come along side his disciples, and join us in experiencing Jesus Christ as the God of heaven who has come down to earth; the God of Heaven who is creating something new and inspiring, even now. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Lord God our Maker, we praise you for your life-giving Word, which shapes and sustains your wondrous creation. We especially thank you for the rhythms of life in which we cultivate our relationships with family and friends, and nurture those in need whom you place before us as recipients of care.

You invite us to be your hands and feet in caring for others. How you honor us, Lord! And how we would honor you! Yet we are tempted to keep you at a safe distance, so that when you call, we can pretend not to hear, when you point to where we are needed, we can seem preoccupied, when you grip our arm, we can pull away. Lord, make us faithful masters of ourselves that we may become servants of others.

Eternal God, ours is a world that could use more echoes of your glory, and fewer sounds of the torment we so easily bring upon ourselves and others. Ours is a world that needs more of the gentle words of Jesus, and fewer words that are shouted in anger and seek power over others.

Help us to make the message of your grace clearer and easier for people to hear. Make us amplifiers of your voice, by which our neighbors and coworkers and children and friends can hear you in ways they may not have heard before.

We are blessed, O God, because we hope and trust in you. Uphold those of who are weighed down with the cares of this world: Feed the hungry, providing them with not only earthly sustenance, but the spiritual nourishment of the bread of life. Set prisoners free with the assurance that their sins are forgiven and that you are in control of the events of their lives. Give sight of understanding to those who are blinded by their misguided ways. Be a parent to the orphaned and a comforter to the widowed.

And give us, Lord, faith in our praying and love in our serving, knowing that by your power, all may find a new balance in living and a new victory in adversity, through your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
 and forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors;
 and lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.