

Transfiguration A 2023 Matthew 17:1-9

Both Camp Nawakwa, where I worked for five summers, and Sequanota, where I've spent years, are built in the shadow of mountains. At Sequanota, if you hike even just partway up the mountain to Luther League chapel, on a clear day you can see all the way across the county. At Nawakwa, we would walk about 15 minutes uphill, through woods and an apple orchard, to Upper Temple, where you can see to the Eternal Light Peace Memorial on Gettysburg's battlefield and beyond. Peter, James, and John were not the only disciples to figure out that we encounter the Divine differently up on the mountain.

I suppose if we think of heaven as being up there, somewhere, it make some sense that going up mountains would get us closer to God. This is certainly a theme in Genesis, Exodus, 1 Kings, where Abraham nearly sacrifices Isaac on the mountain in Moriah, Moses receives the Law on Mount Sinai, and Elijah hears the Lord in the sheer silence on Mount Horeb. Jesus' closest disciples may not have known what was going to happen when he brought them up the mountain, but though they were dazzled and afraid, they would have understood the significance of what was happening and Who was making it happen.

Of the three synoptic gospel descriptions of the transfiguration, Matthew is the kindest narrator to Peter, not making assumptions about Peter's ignorance when he offers to build three dwelling places for Moses, Elijah, and Jesus. Although they don't end up staying on the mountain, Peter did, in fact, make a well-informed suggestion: Moses stayed on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights; Elijah likewise waited exactly that long to hear instructions from God after fleeing to the mountain. Jesus prepared for his public ministry by spending 40 days fasting and praying in the wilderness. Peter had never watched an episode of Survivor, but he knew how long God's chosen servants usually stayed on mountains, and if he expected to spend six weeks up there, securing shelter wasn't the worst idea.

In hindsight, we know they weren't up on that mountain to stay, so when Peter makes his suggestion, God interrupts, identifying Jesus as the beloved Son, and telling them to listen to him. The first thing Jesus says to them is to get up and not be afraid—which is the encouragement they need to hear not only because they were terrified by this close encounter with the Lord, but because the last thing Jesus had taught them before they went up on the mountain was that he would be betrayed, crucified, and raised, and that if they were going to follow him, they, too, would have to take up their crosses and prepare to lose their lives. We

know that Jesus can't stay on this mountain for 40 days, because in 40 days, we'll be waving palm branches as he rides into Jerusalem to his death.

Peter isn't wrong when he says, *Lord, it is good for us to be here*. If it wasn't good for them to be there, Jesus wouldn't have brought them along. They are transformed by the experience, and we can imagine that the memory of that amazing day gave them strength and courage when they would later face persecution in Jesus' name. But even though it's good for them to be there, they aren't supposed to stay there; they are supposed to stay with Jesus. And just as Jesus came down from heaven to live among us, Jesus was headed down that mountain, bolstered perhaps by his conversation with Moses and Elijah, encouraged by the Lord naming him *beloved* and *well-pleasing*, but able to clearly see the cross on his horizon. He tells the disciples not to fear, not because what they're about to do isn't scary, but because no matter how scary it is, he's going to be there with them. It's not the mountain itself that is holy, but the presence of the Lord.

I try to avoid using too much "journey" language in Lent, because Jesus' journey to the cross is his and his alone; whatever we may think of our own spiritual path and Lenten disciplines, we are not replicating, even symbolically, what Jesus did when we observe this upcoming penitential season. Yet the job of disciples is, by definition, to discipline ourselves to behave like the one whom we follow. And although we are privileged to live in a time and place where we're not going to be forced to take up literal crosses, this story shows us that our place as Jesus' disciples is not to linger indefinitely where we experience God coming to us, but to go out where we can share the revelation of God's powerful love with others.

I have participated in some beautiful, powerful worship experiences in those mountain chapels at the camps. But those spaces, though holy, were only ever meant to be places we visit, not places where we stay. We are supposed to go there and be moved, but not just for our own enlightenment and edification. The intent is always that we walk back down the mountain and out of the woods, to return to serve our communities, better equipped to love and serve like Jesus. This holy space is a little different in that we are invited to gather here much more frequently, but we still are called to this place to be transformed by word and sacrament, not only for ourselves, but for the sake of the world. God meets us here in water and word, in bread and wine, to nourish us so we can go care for others, knowing that wherever we go, the spirit of God goes with us. As we watch Jesus journey to the cross this Lent, may we see the one who left the glory of the mountaintop to go love and serve all people, and may we, as his disciples, go and do likewise.