

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Coming Down the Mountain

Matthew 17:1-9

Sunday, February 19, 2023

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Good morning! For those that don't know me, my name is Philip Galyon and I am the Pastor of Youth and College Ministries here at Johns Creek UMC. Since I arrived 5 months ago, I have felt nothing but hospitality, grace, and support from this congregation, so thank you, church, for welcoming me with open arms.

Now, let's talk vacations.....I love them and I'm sure you do too. One particular vacation I will always remember is when I went out to Granby Colorado for a vacation with some high school friends back in October of 2021. The views were spectacular! It was a time of rest and being able to recharge. I was in a tough season of life and so being able to get away for a few days was just what I needed. And then, I got the dreaded text message on the last day of my vacation, it was my airline reminding to check in for my flight home. As I was checking in to my flight home after my Colorado trip, I thought to myself.....I could probably stay a few more days, I can push back coming home a few more days.....sadly, my bank account disagreed with me .

For the most part, it's sad when we have to come down the mountain (proverbial or actual) and back into the real world, isn't it? We have to come back to the problems we tried to forget while resting on vacation. And yet, in the midst of the chaos of our lives, we have a God who gives us the strength and endurance to walk through the valley with us, to sit with us in our suffering, and gives us a command found hundreds of times throughout scripture.....do not fear.....

Our Gospel passage this morning comes from the book of Matthew 17: 1-9

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 bright as light. 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 set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."

This, again, is the word of God for the people of God Today is Transfiguration Sunday. This is the day when we mark the end the season after Epiphany and Ordinary Time and move into the season of lent. We started off this season of Epiphany with Baptism of the Lord Sunday and today we bookend this season with the story of God speaking yet again to Jesus' followers and reminding them of Jesus' glory and to actually listen to Jesus.

We read about an encounter with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah that Peter, James, and John experienced. To help us understand our passage today, we need to back up to Matthew 16 because if you'll notice, our passage this morning starts off by saying "six days later".....well, what happened six days before this? I'm glad you asked!

In Matthew 16, Jesus tells his disciples **"that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." 23 But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance[h] to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."**

Now, if I'm Peter, I'm hurt. All he was trying to do was to keep his mentor from dying and what does Jesus do?

He responds by calling him a hindrance. Jesus reminds Peter to set his eyes on divine things and not earthly things because all throughout their time together, Jesus is telling his followers, look, I'm going to be put to death and then rise again. I can imagine this news being hard for Peter and so he did what some of us may do when we don't want to hear bad news or face tough times, we ignore what is being said to us.

This interaction between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 16 sets up for the Transfiguration story today. Jesus takes Peter, along with James and John, up on a mountain and there Jesus' glory is revealed. I can only imagine what the disciples must have felt and seen when Jesus starts to emit a white, glowing light, and combined with the presence of Moses and Elijah...wow! Jesus wanted to show his closest followers a glimpse of what his revealed glory would look like. Jesus knew that his words about his death and resurrection were probably leaving his disciples hurt, weary and fearful. They didn't want to see Jesus die, they didn't want to hurt, they didn't want Jesus to leave. **The transfiguration showed those on the mountain that there was indeed a hope for the future, a hope, love, and light that will last for generations to come.**

The disciples had something I think we can all relate to, mountain top experiences. This is a phrase in the church world that means we've had this moment or extended time with Jesus that we will never forget. These mountain top experiences can happen in a place that is outside of our ordinary life, or it can be in unexpected moments in our every day life. Maybe it was at a Summer Camp like Camp Glisson, or maybe it was on a spiritual retreat or on a mission trip. Whatever the case may be, we never want to leave those experiences, do we? Some of us have had the mountain top experiences and can testify to their importance to our lives. But even after these experiences, we all have also had to return to the valley haven't we? From the sacred moments in our lives, to the scariest moments, and all those in between, the transfiguration story reminds us that Jesus is there, reaching out to raise us to life again, no matter where we are.

I think it's important to note that you don't need an actual mountain to have mountain top experiences, to encounter Jesus as the disciples did. For most of us, these mountain top experiences happen in the ordinary moments of our lives. From the classroom to our work places, to our homes, or anywhere in between, these intimate encounters with Jesus can happen any place and any time we are willing to be vulnerable and allow ourselves to rest, take a breath, and trust that no matter

what, Jesus will be walking beside us every step of the way.

As I mentioned earlier, we never want special moments or experiences to end, and the disciples on that Transfiguration day did not want to go back down the mountain either. They dreaded the proverbial text message of saying it's time to go home. And why? I think it is because while they may have changed during the transfiguration, everyone else down the mountain may not have changed with them. In the valley, there were no prophets of old. There was no audible divine voice, no light emanating from Jesus' face. They were content on staying up there because it felt safe.

The encounters with Jesus are holy, restful, sacred moments that is God's way of preparing us for what awaits us at the bottom of the mountain when we return home. And what awaits us can be a hard pill to swallow; because see I think **we live in a world that has the ability to break us and yet this world is never beyond God's redemption.** We as Christians are called to share the love, light, and hope Christ offers us every day to those who have been labeled as unworthy, those who have been oppressed, those who have been considered outcasts in our society. And while that is tall task, it's one that Jesus took seriously, and so should we. It is in those intimate encounters with Jesus that we are given his eyes, heart, and strength to share the Gospel with all we meet, whether with our actions or with our words. Again, while this world can be hard to live in, it is and never will be beyond God's redemption. After our encounters with Jesus, we are always called to go down the mountain. Jesus sends the disciples down the mountain into the world he loves, promising them that he will be with them always. We too are sent, we too must listen and obey.

Often, I think we are like Peter in many ways. He has this incredible experience, this moment of seeing Jesus' glory shine and what does Peter do? He starts building tents for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter's thinking to himself, if we can just stay up here forever, we won't be hurt, and in his mind, Jesus will not have to be crucified (as we talked about earlier in Matthew 16). Peter may be thinking, there will be no pain, sorrow, hurt, or fear on this mountain. And before Peter can even finish his sentence, God speaks. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And Matthew says the disciples immediately go to the ground and become fearful. Why? Because they remembered what Jesus had told them about his death. They remembered how their teacher and Lord was going to be taken away from them. He had spoken about his

death to his disciples many times, but they just didn't want to accept it or to listen to Jesus talk about it because they knew there was nothing to be done to save Jesus from being crucified and leaving the earth and that broke their hearts and froze them with fear. They started to think about what a life without Jesus would be like and I think we can empathize with that kind of fear.

I think we have all been there, haven't we? We've been in situations where we operate out of a place of fear. We allow our decision making to be controlled by our anxiety. It is in those fearful moments where we miss the direction that God is leading us in the midst of our fear and pain. **The mountain was a way for God to prepare a community of companions for the sacred journey ahead**, to offer something to hold onto when they descend into the crushing reality of the world below. That's what the church should be, should it not? We gather on Sundays to read, to pray, to listen, and to be in community with other believers. We gather to gain strength for the week ahead. We yearn for these moments where we, like the disciples, feel the hand of Jesus on us reminding us to not be afraid, no matter what comes our way. The church is called to be a place of hope, healing, and restoration. We come here to charge our spiritual batteries so we can be reminded of the comforting words of Jesus when it feels like everything around us is crumbling. We come here to be supported by one another and be empowered by the holy spirit to share the light of Christ with those around us. We come here so that when we find ourselves backed into a corner and feel like there is no hope or no way out, we remember of Jesus on the mountain to help us through the valleydo not fear.

These are the moments in which we realize God is present in our suffering because as we are about to embark on our Lenten journey together, we will come to find that God suffers with us in those hard moments because God knows what suffering feels like. The transfiguration offers the disciples, and really all of us, the paradox that while there is nothing they can do to save themselves from suffering, there is also no way they can shield themselves from the light of God that sheds hope in their darkest moments. Just as God was with Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, he was also with Jesus and his disciples in the garden, on the cross, and ultimately the empty tomb. **The transfiguration offers us a vision of the future as we go through the Lenten season**, as we focus on prayer, as we walk with Jesus and his followers from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday and beyond.

On this Transfiguration Sunday, we are reminded that this is the point at which God says to the world and says

to each of us that there is nothing we can do to prepare for or stand in the way of joy or sorrow and that is HARD. We want control. We want to make sure we are immune to the hard times. The truth is, we are not immune to suffering. In the midst of our suffering or hard times, we also need to be reminded that God sits with us and comforts us in our suffering.

We are encouraged that God will find us when our hearts are broken and when we discover joy. God will find us when we run away and when we are sitting in the middle of what seems like a storm we will never get out of. May we cherish our intimate times with God so that we can rest, be recharged and face the world head on with the Holy Spirit by our side. May this season of Lent be one where we turn the ordinary experiences we have into sacred ones and give us the courage to be the beloved creations God designed us to be.

I don't know what you are going through today, but what I do know is no matter what, you are loved by God and you matter to God. May we be like Peter, James and John in that when we have our intimate encounters with Jesus, that we listen to the sacred words of our passage today, to get up, to not be afraid, and go down the mountain. **God is with us on the mountain and God is with us in the valley.**

In the name of the triune God we pray, Amen!



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