

Wrapped in a Cloud

A Sermon for Every Sunday, Transfiguration, Year A

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Matthew 17:1-9

I.

One weekend a few years back, my husband and I went hiking up a mountain with a couple of friends in order to camp out there at the top overnight. Because the hike had been harder than we thought, by the time we arrived it was dark. It also was beginning to mist, so we built a fire fairly quickly and got our tents up before things got too wet. After dinner, we went to sleep. And when the sky began to lighten, we woke up.

When we crawled out of the tent, we realized that we were actually standing in a cloud. The light rain the night before had given way to foggy clouds lying low and wrapping themselves around the mountain range that morning. Leaving our tents, we slowly picked our way to the edge of the rocks and simply stood in the cloud, catching glimpses of the vast expanse that lay around us until the sun finally came out fully, burnt off the fog, and we could see clearly again. Quietly, and without a lot of conversation, we packed up, and made our way back down the mountain.

I remember that night and morning, not because it was a particularly invigorating hike or the perfect camping experience, but because of how it felt to sleep deeply in the middle of nature and what it felt like to wake up rested and healthy and filled with a sense of peace as we stood wrapped in a cloud on the top of a mountain far away from all the distractions, the work, the sheer neediness of the world below. I could hike back down the mountain after that, ready to face the day, because I had found rest and peace and perspective. I could come back down the mountain because I took part of what it had given me with me as I left.

II.

It had not been an easy time for the disciples and Jesus. Not only had they been bombarded at every turn by people seeking healing or help, they had begun to be questioned by the religious leaders of the day. They could not find a place of rest and retreat anywhere they turned.

Into the midst of this crucible of questions and exhaustion, Jesus had asked his disciples who they believed he was. Peter had said that Jesus was the Messiah. The Lord. But even though Peter had used all the right words, it turned out he still hadn't really understood what they meant. Because when Jesus began to talk about a cross, Peter crumbled. No longer a cornerstone but a stumbling block. How could someone save and liberate God's people if he was killed? Peter wondered. It just didn't make sense.

Then Jesus had told his followers that the road to Jerusalem would be a difficult one. And that it would end in a cross. If they wanted to follow him, they too would have crosses to bear. He had been trying to tell his disciples who he really was and why he had come. He had been trying to tell them what it would mean to be the Messiah. But all Peter had wanted was for Jesus to stop talking. He had felt as if the Jesus he had known and loved was slipping through his fingers.

Still, when Jesus began to make his way up the mountain in our text for today, Peter, James, and John followed him, picking their way over outcroppings of rock and the slippery coating of dust and sand, to stand with him at the top. They look back over all that had happened. They remembered being called to follow. And now, standing at the top of this

precipice, looking down and across the valleys ahead, they began to wonder where Jesus would lead them next.

III.

It was while they were there, on that mountain, that everything changed. The three disciples had expected an intermission, a pause in the action, but instead they were thrown into a terrifying, mystical experience they could have never predicted and could never fully explain. All through Scripture, prophets and leaders meet God on the mountains. Moses, enveloped in clouds, is given the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai. Elijah hears God in the still, small voice, as powerful as a thundering silence there on a mountain. And here, in this story, Peter, James, and John encounter God as well. In the transfiguration, God knits together the law, the prophets, and the gospel, weaving them into a story and narrative of faith that finds its culmination in the person of Jesus. Moses and Elijah and Jesus stand together at the top of the mountain, clothed in white.

And makes sense that Peter wants to stay there on that mountaintop, far away from the world below. Here on the mountaintop he isn't distracted by the demands of other people and their needs. He didn't have to think too hard about what Jesus might have meant when he began to talk about a cross and suffering and death. Here on the mountaintop he saw the glorified, victorious Jesus he had always wanted, shining in splendor and glory. So he says, "It would be good to stay here. Together, Jesus. Let's pitch some tents and stay put."

But then God's glory pulls back the veil between heaven and earth even more fully and begins to speak: "Look, here is my son. My beloved. Listen to him."

And the disciples are terrified. Falling to their knees, they tremble in fear until the cloud melts away, the cracked door to heaven is again sealed, and they are left there, on the mountain, alone with Jesus. Even as they cower, Jesus reaches out his hand, touching their shoulders and saying, “Get up. Do not be afraid.” The cloud has dispersed. Jesus’ robe is back to its dusty brown. Moses and Elijah have disappeared. And it is almost as if everything is back to normal. But of course, in reality, nothing will ever be the same.

IV.

In the Gospel of Matthew, this moment of transfiguration—this revealing of God’s glory—on the mountaintop serves as a turning point. Jesus, who has been ministering throughout the countryside, now turns his face toward Jerusalem, ready to start down the road to the cross. And the disciples have a decision to make. Will they keep following him on this new leg of the journey?

The transfiguration is also a turning point for us. It is positioned between Epiphany, a season characterized by light and revelation, and Lent, a season of repentance as we too journey to the cross. From this mountain we can look behind to see Jesus being baptized, Jesus beginning his ministry, Jesus teaching, preaching, and healing. We can also look forward, seeing the rocky and winding path to Jerusalem. We can see, from this place the ways that Jesus will continue to open his arms up to the world, reaching out to each of us, until those arms are stretched out across the beams of a cross. And from this mountain, we are even given a glimpse of the end of the story, when Jesus will once again stand robed in glory as he is raised from the dead and ascends to heaven.

Like any experience of the divine, the transfiguration is shrouded in mystery—a burning bush that is not consumed; a still small voice; a cloud and pillar of fire—these are ultimately all “You had to be there” type of events. Even for Peter, James, and John, part of the story, part of the meaning eludes them. And they come back down the mountain not quite sure they know what just occurred.

On this day we, like the disciples, are invited to remember all that we have come to believe about Jesus. And at the same time, we are asked to allow Jesus to transform those beliefs and reshape them. For just like Peter, when we think we have made progress, when we think we have finally figured it out, we are often brought up short by God, reminded that our journey *of* faith and our journey *to* faith are not yet over. There is still more to Jesus than we had allowed ourselves to imagine.

V.

The fourth-century mystic Gregory of Nyssa said, "The knowledge of God is a mountain, steep indeed, and difficult to climb."¹ As we grow in our faith there are moments when we feel as if we have been climbing for years, still unsure whether we are heading in the right direction. There are times when we find ourselves on the wrong path and we must turn around and backtrack in order to find our way. And there are moments when we find ourselves at the top of a beautiful vista, given a glimpse of the world as it truly is, as it ought to be, only to find that the trail continues on, calling us ever forward.

In Haiti there is a proverb, “Beyond mountains, there are mountains.” And today that is true for us as well. For Jesus is already on his way back down the trail. Back into the crush of

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 44.

people waiting for healing, for vision, and for hope. Back into the middle of all that need and all those questions. Moving forward to what lies ahead. He has put his hand out to us. Told us to rise up. Told us not to be afraid. He has invited us to come and follow him once more. We better be on our way.

Amen.