

“Down From the Mountain”
Luke 9:28-43a
Sunday, February 7, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

I have a question for you this morning:

Have you ever been on a rollercoaster? If so, raise your hand.

OK, here’s another question:

Have you ever been scared on a rollercoaster? Have you ever screamed so loud on a rollercoaster you thought your lungs would come up your throat and out of your mouth? Have you ever been so scared on a rollercoaster you screamed, Let me off! Let me off! I don’t wanna go on this ride anymore!!

If so, raise your hand.

Well, if you’ve ever been scared on a rollercoaster, you may be able to relate to the following story as told by Peter Prange:

“What do you think about roller coasters? When I was a kid,” writes Peter, “I was deathly afraid of them. We didn’t live too far from Great America, which was the big amusement park in our area. So we would go down there about every summer, but I would never go on a roller coaster with my brother or sister. They would always say, ‘Come on, you have to try it to see if you like it,’ but I was happy riding the bumper cars and the merry-go-round. The psychologists call that having a type B personality. Type A personalities are those folks who love roller coasters. That’s what my sister Susan is like. She’s a definite type A. Type B personalities like me tend to shy away from anything too exciting.

“But then my senior year in high school came. I was on the student council, and the student council always went to Great America at the end of the year. I hadn’t been there in quite a few years, and so I was looking forward to it. But still I had never ridden on a roller coaster, and for some reason I admitted that to my friends. They couldn’t believe it. ‘You’ve never ridden on a roller coaster? Well, you’re going to ride on one now.’ So I did,” writes Peter, “and I really did enjoy it. I was excited and terrified at the same time. After that first ride, my friend sitting next to me had one piece of advice. He said, ‘You know, it’s even more fun if you open your eyes.’ You’ve probably heard it said before, ‘If you don’t keep your eyes open, you’re bound to miss something.’ That was me on the roller coaster. It’s a good encouragement that we all need to hear once in a while: Open your eyes.”

In Luke’s telling of the Transfiguration story, God tells us to open our eyes if we want to see the glory of Jesus. God tells us to open our ears if we want to hear the mission to which Jesus calls us.

I. Mystery on the mountaintop.

What happened on that mountaintop is a mystery. Luke tells us that Jesus went up the mountain to pray, taking three of his disciples with him – Peter, James and John. Jesus’ glory shines throughout the story; Moses and Elijah soon appear in splendor, as well. They speak with Jesus about his imminent death and resurrection, to take place in Jerusalem. Moses signifies Jesus’ fulfillment of the law, and Elijah his fulfillment of the prophecies of the Hebrew scriptures. The disciples continually miss the point, getting sleepy and drowsy in their confusion. When they finally wake up, Peter offers to build booths or tents, in keeping with the Jewish feast of Tabernacles: “one for [Jesus], one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (v. 33). The disciples are still missing the point! A voice from a cloud silences them: “This is my Son, my

Beloved; listen to him!”

Lori Brandt Hale is an Associate Professor at Augsburg College in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I like how she describes this voice-from-a-cloud moment. She writes, “All that is missing is the cosmic hand, reaching down to give Peter a good ‘you-are-missing-the-point’ slap upside the head.”

You may have heard of John Wesley’s famous “slap upside the head” moment:

“John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist movement. John was an Anglican priest and deeply pious person. After a missionary journey to Savannah, Georgia, he wrote in his journal, ‘On my return to England, January 1738, being in imminent danger of death and very uneasy on that account, I was strongly convinced that the cause of that uneasiness was unbelief and gaining a true living faith was the one thing needful for me. But still I fixed not this faith on its right object. I had only faith in God, not faith through Christ.’

“He had been a minister for 10 years and he struggled to know who God was, but he had not recognized Jesus. In 1738 Wesley shifted his focus from a yearning for God to looking intently for the face of Jesus. When he began to see God present through Jesus he wrote in his journal, ‘In the evening, in May 1738, I went very unwillingly to a home group on Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle on Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation.’ The next morning when Wesley got up he wrote this in his journal, ‘The moment I awakened, Jesus Master was in my heart and in my mouth and I found all of my strength lay in keeping my eyes fixed upon Him and my soul waiting on Him continually.’

“John Wesley was able to inspire the people of the Methodist movement because he communicated the power of a heart changed, the power of a person transfigured by faith and the reality of that transformation being available to every believer” (as quoted by Brent Porterfield).

Like Wesley, we can each be “transfigured by faith,” if we “look intently for the face of Jesus.” God says: Open your eyes! See the glory of Jesus! See my Son, my Beloved!

II. Coming down.

God also says, “Listen to him!”

But if we listen to Jesus, we might hear what he has to say. And if we hear what he has to say, we might feel the need to follow him. We might find that we have an uncontrollable desire to serve his kingdom and to love others and to preach good news to the poor and the captive.

If we see that the glory of Jesus includes the suffering of the cross; if we hear that the mission of Jesus includes sacrificial service to the least and the lost... Well, we might have to take another look at our lives and our priorities.

Better not to see too much. Better not to hear.

We prefer to think that the totality of faith is on the mountain of the transfiguration. We like to think that Jesus is all heavenly glory. We refuse to look at the cross, where Jesus was nailed, weak and suffering and in pain. Defeated.

The transfiguration is only one mountaintop experience. Golgotha is another. In Jesus’ transfiguration we glimpse his resurrection glory. In his crucifixion we glimpse his radical understanding of power.

The scene following Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain is key to understanding how this event changes us. How it changes his disciples, his followers.

We see him in a new way. We are awed by his transfiguration glory. And when he comes down the mountain, we are “astounded at the greatness of God,” who rebukes unclean spirits, heals a young boy, and responds to the pleas of an anguished father.

As Moses led an exodus out of slavery in Egypt, so Jesus leads an exodus out of slavery to sin and death. Jesus discusses his exodus, or “departure” (v. 31), with Moses and Elijah while still up on the mountaintop. Jesus’ exodus is accomplished through death on the cross, for our sakes, and through his glorious resurrection three days later.

In her book, Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx, Heidi Neumark writes about Transfiguration Lutheran Church, which she served for nearly 20 years. The dwindling congregation hid behind its locked doors, shut tight against the chaos and confusion of a neighborhood gripped by poverty, lack of education, scarce resources, crime, drug abuse, and despair.

“When Peter and the others came down from the mountain,” she writes, “they found a father and a child gasping for life. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And they found transfiguration. And so it is. When the disciples of this Bronx church unlocked the doors of their private shelter and stepped out into the neighborhood, they did meet the distress of the community convulsed and mauled by poverty...But they also discovered transfiguration as a congregation in connection with others...living high up in the rarefied air isn’t the point of transfiguration...[It was] never meant as a private experience of spirituality removed from the public square. It was a vision to carry us down, a glimpse of unimagined possibility at ground level.”

We like to stay up on the mountaintop, basking in the glorious transfiguration radiance. But Jesus comes back down the mountain. So do his disciples.

So must we.

This is not to say that the mountaintop is bad. The mountaintop is transfiguring for Jesus' disciples. Mountaintop experiences are transfiguring for Jesus' modern day disciples – for you and for me. As we see more clearly who he is – the one who fulfills the law and the prophets, the one who brings about a new Exodus from slavery to sin and death, the one who is the Messiah, the One who is the hope we have been waiting for – as we see more clearly these truths about Jesus, we carry that clarity down the mountain. We carry our experiences of Jesus' glory “down the mountain” into our everyday lives. We carry our experiences of Jesus' glory “down the mountain” into the valley of our suffering and the suffering of others.

Closing.

We each have crosses that we avoid and crosses that we are forced to take up. We each have mountaintop moments when we see and hear God's revelation to us. Mountaintops to sustain us on the path of following Jesus; crosses for us to take up, in service to his kingdom: This is the message of the transfiguration.

The Scottish theologian, Henry Drummond, once said, “God does not make the mountains in order to be inhabited. God does not make the mountaintops for us to live on the mountaintops. It is not God's desire that we live on the mountaintops. We only ascend to the heights to catch a broader vision of the earthly surroundings below. But we don't live there. We don't tarry there. The streams begin in the uplands, but these streams descend quickly to gladden the valleys below.”

The streams start in the mountaintops, but they come down “to gladden the valleys below.” God is with us in the valleys. God is with us in our darkest, most painful moments. God in Christ Jesus calls us to be with others who walk through valleys of suffering. Through

the power of His spirit, we come down the mountain to rebuke demons and to heal hurting people in his name.

The Transfiguration was a particular moment, a moment of glorious revelation. In that revelation, God declared Jesus to be his beloved Son, the One to be listened to. For Peter, James and John – for you and for me – it can be hard to come back down the mountain.

We can be comforted, knowing that God reveals himself in many ways, both grand and small, every day. We should be challenged, knowing that God calls us to follow Jesus in the way of the Cross.

Amen.