

February 19, 2023: This Day's Sermon – Transfiguration Sunday

Readings: Matthew 16:24 -17:8; Psalm 41:7-10

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Let us pray: *Holy God, in the irony of the cross we encounter the intersection of sin and death, life and grace. In Jesus, you raise us up and repay us with a love that cannot be measured; a love we cannot earn. Open our minds to receive your grace. Open our hands to pick up your cross of life and bear your love into the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

In this morning's text, we find ourselves at both the cross and a crossroads – a point at which a crucial decision must be made that will have far-reaching consequences. In the paradox of the cross, Jesus teaches what it means to follow him. The very cross that he will soon carry – the cross that will serve as the instrument of his death – will become, for us, a conveyance of life in its fullest.

Jesus' invitation conveys a meaning that is, simultaneously, explicit and implicit. To follow Jesus requires an explicit action: Picking up the cross. Picking up the cross implies that our hands are free to do so.

As Christ followers, we stand, once again, at a crossroads that is both entirely familiar and entirely new. As we consider our path through Lent, we are invited to ask ourselves what of our cluttered lives will we lay down to make room for the cross that will ultimately give us life ... new life.

Some six days later, the veil that keeps those things hidden is pushed aside. On this day, Jesus deviates from his pattern of going alone to a quiet place to pray by taking Peter and James and John with him. I had to pause and wonder, why these three? Are they more trusted, more beloved, more insightful? Or is it, as one commentary I read suggested, that the impetuous Peter and the Sons of Thunder just need more supervision? Or might it be that there is a part of them that reflects the part of us that often seeks our own way before the way of Jesus?

In the midst of our contemplation, we meet God's beloved Son transfigured, standing alongside Moses and Elijah: The revealer of God's Law and the bridge to God's Law fulfilled. In the glory of that moment, we see a most natural, human response. In the midst of laying out his plan in response to that glory before him, God interrupts to provide direction: "Listen to him."

It sounds so simple, does it not? Just. Listen. Have we been listening to what Jesus has been teaching us? Have we heard him teach us about being salt and light; enhancing the world with the flavor of God's love, illuminating its darkness with God's mercy?

Do we remember that Jesus taught us that we can talk to God

anytime, anywhere, and that God will listen? And to be honest in our interactions with God, not through public displays, but with humility? That our greatest treasures are not the things of this world, but the love and mercy and justice of God that is conveyed to – and through – us.

Are we continuing to learn that judging others is not our work, that God desires us to treat our neighbor as we wish to be treated, and that all of Jesus' teachings are the bedrock of a life that cannot be destroyed, no matter what comes?

As we continue to live into Jesus' teachings, are we trusting that the weeds – the bad stuff of life – can never diminish the power of God's blessings and that even the smallest seed of faith, when planted, has the power to give life to another?

Perhaps it is as simple as "listening". Listening to where we should go; to what God wants us to surrender to, and what God wants us to carry into the world. To listen to that still, small voice that will come when we are afraid; a voice that raises us up, saying, "Get up, and do not be afraid."

I tell you this with certainty. I tell you this because I have experienced it. God literally raised me up to stand on mountains. I experienced the words to our Hymn of the Day before I had ever heard them. God literally drew me – God raised me up to stand on mountains right here in the mountains of Colorado.

Some months after Jeff's death, two of my dearest friends and I set off on an adventure to Glen Eyrie Castle near Colorado Springs. It was an adventure grounded in the misadventures of our shared life together in the Minnesota Courts: One State Trooper, one Court Reporter, and one Corrections Agent. Grounded in our individual brokenness and the brokenness of others, God, for reasons only God knows, invited us to climb the mountain of faith.

It was a journey for the three of us that was both shared and separate. Our hopes and dreams and challenges were both revealed and unknown. I came seeking a sign that Jeff was safely in God's presence and that I would see him again someday.

Much like Peter, I had it all figured out. This revelation would come in the form of a great elk or deer. It made sense, in light of the history Jeff had with hunting in the mountains of Colorado with our boys and other family members, right?

With my notion of God's revealing firmly in place, I watched ... and I waited. I waited ... and I watched. I heard an elk, its bugle echoing clearly across the darkness of the night sky

when we stayed in Estes Park, but knew that was not what I was looking for.

The days and nights passed by and ... still nothing. On our final night at Glen Eyrie, I announced to Laurie and Swantje that I would be rising early to meet the sunrise. Whoever wanted to come along was welcome to join me. Laurie chose to sleep; Swantje was up before the crack of dawn.

We set out on the trail up the mountain. In spite of my lifelong fear of heights, I felt fearless, somehow. Fearless is not a word anyone would ever equate with me. Chicken Little would seem more fitting.

And, yet, there I was, being seemingly drawn by something beyond myself up the mountainside, as Swantje struggled to keep up. Suddenly, without even realizing it, there I was, on the side of a mountain, looking out over God's creation.

There was no deer. There was no elk. There was just the whisper of the words Jeff always shared after returning from hunting in Colorado: "When I stand on W Mountain, I feel the presence of God." In that moment, I felt the love that Jeff and I had shared; and in that love I felt the presence of God in a new way ... for God is love. We can all relate to our experiences with God's love, can we not?

In the midst of the cloud, I did not realize that the memory of that moment was Jesus saying, "Get up, and do not be afraid." I didn't know then that that moment would lead to this moment. I had no clue that my journey would lead to California, to Pastor Phil, then to this faith family and the community around us that God calls us to love and serve together to His glory. I did not know then, but I do know now and it seems that God needed me to remember that in this moment.

As you prepare to take your first steps into Lent, spend some time remembering the mountaintop experiences in your life. Trust that God does, indeed, raise us up when we least expect it. Jesus has journeyed – *for us* – through death to life, and invites us to live life, to be life and to give life to those around us. God grant that we might continue to listen and learn together, allowing God to lead. May we get up and live as ones who are not afraid.

Amen.