March 2, 2014   
Matthew 17:1-9   
*Jesus goes with us*

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Matthew 17:1-9 The Message

Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?” While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.” When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus. Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

I am a talker. And I use my hands. I lived in Japan for a year and I had to learn how to not only speak slower, but also how to not talk with my hands. In Japan it is rude to use your hands while you talk. So, when I came back after a year of teaching English in Japan, I did not use my hands when I spoke. It was amazing to me how quickly I started talking with my hands again, and speaking quickly! I can totally identify with Peter, in his anxiety he was going to just keep talking! I love that the Message translation says that Peter was babbling.

While I was reading the scripture this week, I kept thinking of that saying, “Don't just stand there; do something!" Peter is determined to do something. He is ready to do an invocation into the faith heroes hall of fame on the mountain. I remember seeing the awe-inspiring beauty of the Grand Tetons National Park for the first time and I immediately thought, I need a camera. I had to capture the moment. Peter is thinking the same thing, he is going to preserve this moment for all posterity. James, John, get busy, don’t just stand there with your mouths hanging open! Do something! Get busy, get to work! Produce! Achieve!

It reminds me of the Protestant work ethic, this idea that we as Protestants thrive on hard work and we work hard as a sign of our faith in Jesus the Christ. We struggle against this myth that our identity is based on our accomplishments. We sometimes feel like if we didn’t accomplish anything, then we wouldn’t know who we are.

Imagine that you are talking to someone that you met here at Greenland Hills, how long would it take before the question is asked, “What do you do?” Our doing is who we are. It seems completely natural that Peter would insist on doing something. But God breaks in, “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.” Stop. Listen. Pay attention.

God does call us to be in ministry to all the world but we do that out of our response to God, not as a requirement to be identified as God’s children. Our identity as a child of God is a gift, pure grace, free, undeserved. Do you remember that book The Purpose-Driven Life by Rick Warren? I identified with that book because I want to be busy, give me something to do! But God reminds me in the story of the transfiguration to stop, to listen, to pay attention. I need to be grounded and centered in the essential reality of God's presence in my life. I need to spend time in awe of the mystery of God so that my doing can be meaningful, purposeful, and sustainable.

Henri Nouwen wrote in his book Out of Solitude these words, “In solitude we become aware that our worth is not the same as our usefulness. We can learn much in this respect from the old tree in the Tao story about a carpenter and his apprentice: A carpenter and his apprentice were walking together through a large forest. And when they came across a tall, huge, gnarled, old, beautiful oak tree, the carpenter asked his apprentice: "Do you know why this tree is so tall, so huge, so gnarled, so old and beautiful?" The apprentice looked at his master and said: "No . . . why?" "Well," the carpenter said, "because it is useless. If it had been useful it would have been cut long ago and made into tables and chairs, but because it is useless it could grow so tall and so beautiful that you can sit in its shade and relax."

As in most things the trick is balance. Knowing when to do and when and how to just be. Learning to take our calling and our work seriously, but not too seriously! Letting go of our need to control and instead listening for the voice of God. May our “doing” be acts of discipleship that flow from our being formed in the awe and wonder of God’s gracious love for us.

How many of us stay busy because we feel we need to justify our life to God and to ourselves and to others? I wonder myself if I stay busy sometimes just so other people will ask, “How does she do all that?” Or maybe, just maybe, I stay busy because if I ever let up, if I ever get quiet and contemplate where God is moving in my life and what God might be calling me to do, then I might have to deal with that, and it might not be exactly what I want, what I have planned. It just might be something calling me outside of my comfort zone. I stay busy to fill the time and space, not just to serve God, but sometimes to block God's will and my discerning of it. I'm not afraid in the stillness that God won't speak to me. Oh no, I'm afraid that God will.

Right before this story Jesus tells his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25). And we hear God telling the disciples just a little while later, “This is my son, my beloved, listen to him!”

As we begin the six-week journey of Lent, it is a journey into suffering, to the cross, for which this transfiguration is intended to prepare Jesus, the disciples, and us. Do you hear God’s voice beckoning to you? “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.” Stop. Listen. Pay attention. Lent begins Wednesday, a service of ashes will be here in the sanctuary at 7 am and 7 pm, and Lent calls us to quit our frantic babbling, to pay attention, to consider who we are as dust apart from whose we are in our baptism. We are God's precious children, forgiven, loved, held, and only from that identity are we gifted and called and sent to do God's work in the world. I encourage all of us to enter a quiet place of awe during these six weeks of Lent because, in order to take up our cross, we have to sit and rest and feel the embrace of our Creator God.

A lot of people give up something, like chocolate or Dr. Pepper, for Lent or people take something on. I want to challenge all of us this Lent to engage in an act of personal and social holiness in the fight to eradicate poverty. Bishop McKee has invited the 160,000 Methodists across 20 counties in 300 churches to join with him by fasting for one meal a week during Lent. To fast from a meal means to not eat it, but it is more than that. Fasting means that all of the time that you would spent buying the food, preparing the food, and eating the food will now be spent in prayer and in quiet. This Lent I will not eat dinner on Monday evenings. I picked Monday evenings because I am so busy that night driving my kids to Dallas Children’s Chorus and basketball practice that evening that I usually do not have time to eat dinner anyway. I thought Monday nights will be easy! But, I am supposed to devote time Monday evenings to prayer, to quiet, to stop, to listen, and to pay attention. It is going to be harder than I thought.

The other part of the challenge is to donate what we would have spent on that meal to a ministry with the poor. We will have baskets on the altar every Sunday for you to bring your offering each week. We are encouraging you to donate to one of three different missions. A ***global*** mission with Kids Against Hunger where 25 cents will provide a meal for a hungry child around the world. And put on your calendar April 27 at 10 am when we will be packaging 4,000 meals for children around the world. A ***regional*** mission with the Zip Code Project which is a North Texas Conference initiative to eradicate poverty in zip codes 75215 and 75426 by mobilizing and targeting the resources of United Methodists and churches in the North Texas Conference.  A ***local*** mission with Emanuel Community Center’s food pantry.  Please indicate how you want your donation to be directed, and we will make a difference together this Lent! If you will look at the front of your bulletin there is an image of ripples from a pebble being thrown into the water. I am thirsting to make a difference this Lent, thirsting to matter, thirsting to know God, thirsting to make a difference. And we will make ripples. Together we will make a difference this Lent.

During these next six weeks I invite us to see the holy and the sacred in the world around us: When a child crawls into your lap for a story; When the hand of someone who is homeless reaches out to you for a sandwich; When the strains of music that moves you floods your soul; When you take a prophetic stand for justice in the chambers of city hall or the school board; When you take time to pray; When you squeeze the juice of an orange into your glass for breakfast; When you open the pages of Scripture to read and study; When you come through disagreements after forgiveness and reconciliation; When you pray for the sick; When you admire the sunrise or sunset.

May we transform the mundane into the momentous. And may we stop our frantic babbling, so that we can listen, and pay attention to God’s voice. May we find the quiet space in which we can pour out our hearts to God, to climb the mountain of transfiguration and to fix our eyes upon God's presence, to pray, and to listen. Stop. Listen. Pay attention. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CHILDREN’S SERMON:

I have a little test for you today - a reading test. I'm going to show you a word that I'm pretty sure some of you will know. Take a look quietly and put your finger on your nose if you can tell me what this word is...ready? (Reveal the paper, oriented to read "mom." Solicit children's answers.)

That's right - "mom." M-O-M spells mom, but are you sure that's what this word really says? What if I turn it over like this? (Turn paper over to orient the letters to read "wow.")

Hmm...You're right - and "wow" is a good word to describe it too, because just by turning the paper in a different direction we have a whole different word. It's the same paper - but we're seeing it in whole new way.

Something similar happens in this week's Gospel lesson. Several of the disciples are walking with Jesus up a high mountain when all of a sudden they see him in a new and different way. His clothes suddenly become a dazzling white and they hear the voice of God explaining that  "this is my Son."

There's a special name for this in the Bible. See if you can say it with me. We call this the transfiguration. When something is transfigured it changes the way it looks or is transformed. (We could say that caterpillars are transfigured when they change into butterflies - their whole appearance changes and they become something new.)

Jesus doesn't change his shape - but like with our "mom" sign, suddenly the disciples are able to see him in a whole new way: as the Son of God.

It's a very exciting moment that changes everything for them.

Can we pray? Dear God,

We thank you for revealing your Son Jesus to us. Help us to live in his example this week.  Amen

Would you pray with me? Most gracious God, we give you thanks for all of the doings in our lives, the opportunities for meaningful work and vocation and relationships. Yet, Lord, we know that in those relationships, we must be grounded in an identity that comes only from you. Remind us of our baptismal calling as your precious children, loved, forgiven, and held; and from that identity, send us out to do your work. Help us to recommit ourselves to that identity so that our work for you might become meaningful in this Lenten season. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.

**Benediction** Walk in light and truth. See the light of Christ in every face. Be the light of Christ to all you meet. Amen.