

2-15-26 Sermon: “A Handful of Glory” – Matthew 17:1-9

It's been a roller coaster of a week for Peter, James, and John.

In the text immediately before this morning's reading, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus commends him, calls him blessed, says, “You, Peter are the rock on which I will build my church.”

The disciples are euphoric, but Jesus' tone begins to change. He tells them how he must go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer at the hands of the religious and political authorities, be killed, and on the third day rise again. Peter, the recently-commended Rock, takes Jesus aside and rebukes him; he says you're talking crazy, Lord, we're never going to let that happen to you. And Jesus' blessings turns to curses in his mouth; he says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me.”

Poor Peter – he's gone from sinner to saint to Satan in just a few minutes' time. And as Peter is licks his wounds, Jesus continues. He tells the disciples, “If you really want to be my followers, deny yourselves, take up your crosses, and follow me. For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.”

The disciples...say nothing. They don't know what to make of a way that requires suffering, a Savior that must die, a road with a cross on it. They're not quite sure this is what they signed on for.

We know that roller-coaster feeling, don't we? That's how it feels every year when the church makes that hard turn into Lent. We've gathered joyfully around the manger, basked in the glow of Epiphany, but starting next week, the road gets dark and the cross looms ahead.

During Lent – during *life* – we are confronted with the facts of human sinfulness and life's fragility. We acknowledge the inevitability of suffering in our lives of faith: We cannot protect ourselves or our loved ones from the thorns of life any more than the disciples can save Jesus from the fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. There are dark valleys on the road before us, and the only way through is, well, through.

Surely Peter, James, and John are relieved at beginning of this morning's reading, when Jesus tells them it's time for a little hike. Six days is a long time to sit with Jesus' difficult teaching. When they set out for the mountain, the disciples are desperately seeking light.

And light is what they get! Jesus is transfigured before their eyes: his face shines like the sun, his clothes are dazzling white. Moses and Elijah appear and begin to talk with him. The disciples are overcome with God's glory; they know something *good* is happening. The people who walked in darkness have indeed seen a great light.

Living here in Taos, we know a thing or two about what happens when things are exposed to the light. Light has the power to melt, to soften. Light opens things up, reveals things from a different angle. Extended exposure to the light of the sun weakens fabric so that it tears more easily. Add some water to that light, and the freeze-thaw cycle will crack open even the hardest of rocks.

I think light does the same thing to people. It melts us. It makes us softer, more tender. Standing on the mountaintop, glowing with God's light, we let down our guard and acknowledge our vulnerability. Linger in the light long enough, and surely our hearts will break right open. We will let God's light in, let our real selves shine, for there is a safety and a clarity that comes with the light.

Moments like this – these mountaintop experiences, basking in the light – they give us something to hope for; they revive our souls. Who can blame Peter for wanting to set up tents, to take up residence where the world is bright and life feels good and God’s glory is finally on display for all to see.

And then comes the cloud. It’s interesting, isn’t it, what happens to the disciples when the light goes away? For up until now, they have seen some very strange things, but they are not afraid.

Yet, as soon as the cloud overshadows them, everything takes on a different hue. The voice of God booms like thunder, and the three disciples who moments before were undaunted in the presence of a spectacular vision now fall to their knees in fear. Things look different, feel different, when the light fades.

So what does Jesus do? He walks over and he touches them.

My friend Patrick – my pastor while I was in college – points to *this* moment as the miracle of the transfiguration. Not the cloud, not the light, the apparitions, the heavenly voice, but the hand of God, reaching out to touch us.

Patrick says, “Does anything banish our fears more perfectly than a simple human touch? This is the way that God comes into the world: not in the brilliant cloud of mystery, not only a voice thundering from heaven, but also [in] a human hand laid upon a shoulder, and the words, ‘Do not be afraid.’

“God’s glory,” Patrick continues, “[God’s] magnificence and power and majesty are [only] surpassed by God’s willingness to shed them all in order that we might finally recognize God’s love and gentleness. We can take just as much of God’s glory as a human hand can hold.”¹

When today is over, we come back down the mountain and descend into the season of Lent. We descend into a world of brokenness, where our human tendency to return evil for evil is on full display. For forty days, we will walk in darkness, knowing each step brings us closer to the cross.

But friends, the good news of the transfiguration is that we do not come down the mountain empty-handed. No, we descend carrying a little handful God’s glory, bread for the journey, a memory of what we’ve seen and heard and felt on the mountain top.

So my question today is: What do *you* need to take down the mountain for the journey ahead?

Is it a memory of the light you’ve seen? A taste of the brilliance of God’s glory? Is it that little glimpse of clarity, of what is *really* true, when we pull back all human trappings and just see the world as it is in the light of God’s love?

Or maybe for you, it’s Jesus’ touch. That handful of human tenderness, of intimacy with God, the reassurance of Christ’s presence in our times of fear and darkness. Maybe you need to come down the mountain knowing that Jesus’ promise is that whenever we walk the way of the cross, we do not walk it alone.

Whatever it is you need from this mountaintop, take it. Guard it, treasure it – keep it safe for the journey. Take it out when you need to – when the darkness gets overwhelming on the road ahead – and share it with your fellow travelers.

This is our gift, to ourselves and to world: As much of God’s glory as a human hand can hold. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Patrick J. Willson, “Matthew 17:1-9: Homiletical Perspective,” **Feasting on the Word**, eds. David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p. 457.