

# “Witnesses to the Light”

a sermon by

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Our New Testament lesson this morning comes from Matthew 17:1-8. It is the story of the transfiguration. Hear the Word of the Lord:

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. Here ends our reading- this is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

I am surprised that they haven’t made a movie out of this passage yet. After all, it has all the elements of a great drama: we have a fearless leader, quaking disciples, a supernatural event- the transfiguration- that defies logic and is yet too beautiful not to believe--Christ’s face shown like the sun, this complex person of Jesus is permeated with light and the true nature of his being becomes transparent for all to see-- all on the mountaintop that is. Enter in Moses and Elijah, and we have connections to Jesus and John who came before him as the fulfillment of prophesy, not to mention a cameo by the few people in the Bible believed to have actually ascended to heaven in bodily form-I can’t wait to figure out how that works. Oh, and then there is the voice

of God. This is a special effects artist's dream come true to be sure, and stands in the gospels as one of the most spectacular events in the pages of the New Testament next to the resurrection. Yet, for all the drama of the text, for all its massive historical and theological implications upon Christ as the Son of God and the fulfillment of God's covenant with the people, you can't help but be intrigued by Peter. Matthew does this on purpose because, like the other gospels, Matthew believes this story has as much to say about discipleship in Christ as it does about Jesus himself.

A step back to look at the context of this event reveals much about what is running through Peter's mind. This mountaintop experience for the disciples comes just 8 verses after Jesus foretold his death to them. The disciples find themselves in a provocative moment in time as they have been following their teacher, this Jesus, for about three years now. They have witnessed his teachings, seen him heal the sick, they have listened to his parables, grown to love him, even to believe in him. Peter had just proclaimed for himself that Jesus is indeed the Son of God when Christ tells them that he will suffer many things, be killed, and be raised up on the third day. Peter, out of intense affection replies "God forbid it, Lord, this shall never happen to you!" for which he is firmly rebuked for setting his mind on the interests of man and not God. And now Peter again finds himself facing a mystery of God he both fears and cannot begin to understand- the transfiguration of Christ- and with Jesus' words about the path he would soon walk- a path that would lead to suffering and death still lingering in his mind Peter does what I probably would have done when feeling frightened, confused, a little hurt and at a complete loss for comprehension or words: He speaks up! "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Poor Peter. A friend of mine likes to refer to Peter as the Barney Fife of the disciples. Because no matter how hard he tries, this guy just can't get it right about Jesus, about discipleship. Even here when he is trying so hard to please, he is cut off by the Holiest of Holies himself- that's got to be a bad feeling. But what Peter lacks in wisdom and understanding he makes up for in devotion and is therefore called 'the beloved'. Because while this passage does not tell us about his theological aptitude, it does speak to the condition of his heart that was overflowing for Christ. "It is good for us to be here, Lord let us stay here. All you are saying, all they will do to you- let it not be so- look, I will build you a temple and we will all come and worship you here, Jesus, please, God forbid it, this shall never happen to you." As modern Christian readers of the gospels we have the great advantage of reading all of this through the lense of the resurrection, and therefore cannot help but slap our foreheads as we read time and again of the inability of the disciples to wrap their minds around what they were experiencing in Christ. Of course Jesus has to suffer and die, or there would be no eternal life! But in all honesty who among us, were we to find ourselves bearing witness to the light of the transfiguration, comfortable on a mountaintop with Jesus, and fearing the path to come wouldn't want to just sit there forever with him in worship? It is good here, Lord, let us stay here, Lord. When the drama of the moment has passed, when God's cloud had lifted, the prophets vanished, it is just the disciples and Jesus who are left on the mountain, and it is time to go. "Get up and do not be afraid." Jesus says. And they descended the mountain and Jesus again turns his face to Jerusalem and foretells his death.

What seems to me to be a fundamental theme with Peter has to do with the issue of surrender- surrendering to the unknown, to be sure, but also surrendering the hold he has on the gospel in order to experience the blessing that is God going forth into the world into uncertain

times, and challenging us to go forth with him. Emmanuel, God with us, going before us to redeem the unthinkable for the sake of our souls and inviting us to loosen our white knuckled grasp on the Savior, our hold on what we think we need, so that we can experience the salvation that is on the other side of the surrender. Jeremiah has a few choice words to offer on surrender- he is more bold than I am, than most preachers I know (Presbyterian at least), he says “cursed are those who trust in mere mortals, and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness.” Ouch. Oh come on, Jeremiah, lighten up, I want to say, how about just “human are those who make mere flesh their strength” because it makes me uncomfortable to admit how much Jeremiah is actually pointing a finger not just in my direction but right at me- even a degree from Seminary, an anticipated bestowment of ordination cannot purge you of these tendencies, this sin. I don’t know about you, but I think the view is pretty good from the mountaintop, it is good here, and I don’t like surrendering what I know I need- my time, my money, my energy, my monopoly on Jesus for a promise I can’t wrap around me on a cold night, or cruise to the beach in, or feel special in when I wear it or comfortable with when I am out in public. I know what I need and what it takes to get that, and besides, life and depth of spirituality and richness of community in Christ could not possibly be any better than the limits of my own imagination or ideas of what these things are and could be. Right?

Thankfully Jeremiah doesn’t leave us in the curse, but counters this indictment of the tendency toward the Casual Comfortable Christian in all of us with the richness of blessing that is life outside the box we try and place ourselves, our church, and even our Savior in when we cling to what we know for fear of what we do not.

“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.” Wow.

Tom Kort, pastor at Sardis Presbyterian said at Gregg Green’s installation service here almost two months ago that First Presbyterian is like the kind of tree you want growing in your front yard. It has deep roots and broad branches, it provides shade in the heat and color in its leaves, it sustains life within it that is even deeper than we can see--beneath the bark, under the soil, living in clusters of twigs within it. It is a source of enjoyment for all who pass by or dwell beneath its canopy. And after just under two months of being here, I tend to agree with him, much to my delight. But if we are not careful, our experience in this church, our life of discipleship, can become quite mountaintop-esque. Mind you, some of this can be quite good to be sure--revelation, experiencing Christ face to face, desiring worship and fellowship with the divine and one another. Even hearing God’s voice from a cloud every now and then are all great things. For Peter, it didn’t seem life could get much better on that mountaintop, “it is good here, Lord, let us stay here, Lord”-- and any one of us would probably agree. But we are not called to build a temple there- high above the world, secure from invasion, safe from the mundane, spotless above the mire and the dirt and the standing water in the trenches of the valley. We have experienced a gift in Jesus Christ, a gift that we cannot keep to ourselves but are commissioned to go and share with one another and with the world! This is not only what we are called to do, as Christians, it is what we were made for- built from the inside out for- to roll

up our sleeves, take a deep breath, cherish the gift of the mountaintop experience to be sure, but use that gift not for gluttony, but for nourishment and restoration for the task that is at hand, for the journey that stretches out before us, temple walls couldn't hold the Word of God if they tried anyway. Christ will not have it, no matter how much he himself may have even desired to stay on that peak, surrounded by prophets and worshipers as is fitting for the Son of God. But foretelling his own trial he gathers the disciples and descends into the ordinary- into conflict with neighbors, into a resistant world, into budget deficits and discussions, demons and illness, into literal and figurative storms of life, into endless questions as to what the minimum requirement is to obtain the kingdom of God, how much exactly do I have to give, Jesus? How much exactly do I have to love my neighbor? And he travels into a world of endless opportunity for ministry- stretching out vastly, overwhelmingly, beautifully and fearfully before him. It is in this world that he would suffer, but in this world too that he would effect salvation for all humankind- would reveal himself in a glory that transcends even the transfiguration, to the astonishment of the disciples. It is good on the mountaintop to be sure, but it is better to go forth.

It is said that one day Saint Francis was in a particularly festive mood, singing over his joy in creation and the wonder of God when he came upon an almond tree. He said to the tree "Brother Almond, speak to me of God" and the tree was instantly covered in blossoms. Planted beside living waters, drawing nourishment from the spring of life that will never run dry, now is the season to bloom, Christians for if not now, when? The church needs you, the world needs you. When the mountaintop experience of transfiguration has passed and we are left standing alone with Jesus, how will you or have you chosen to respond to his outstretched hand? It is good here, Jesus, let us stay here, Jesus, or 'lead on, Savior, my life is in your hands'? As those who are witnesses to the light of the world, let us live the gospel with a boldness that will allow even ourselves to be transformed. As congregants of First Presbyterian Church, let us, with Peter, rise to the challenge not to compartmentalize our God but allow him to permeate all of our life guide all our journeys, inform all of our relationships and our decisions. That we as a church might not only continue to be the kind of tree you want in your yard, but a fixture in Charlotte that is as vital as the city itself. Let pray together for guidance as we seek to discern a faithful response to our Lord when he says, "This is my Son with whom I am well pleased, listen to him."