

“A Glimpse of Glory”

Luke 9:28-36

Sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church

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According to the Celtic Christian tradition, heaven and earth are only a few feet apart. But there are times and places, when and where the distance between the two evaporates and the boundary that once separated heaven and earth becomes porous and permeable, like a veil that is lifted. The Celts call these “Thin Places” – those moments when we can step through, glimpse the Divine, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us.”¹ A “Thin Place” is anywhere or anytime we become so saturated with the presence of God that our hearts are opened, that we are unmasked, transformed to our more essential selves.

Today’s reading, among others throughout the Bible, describes such a time and place when Jesus took a few of his disciples up on a mountain to pray. We call this the Transfiguration, the epiphany of all epiphanies, that looks back to the experience of Moses in our first reading and looks forward to the resurrection at the end of the Gospel. As you listen this morning, I encourage you not to be distracted by the questions of historical facts and locations. We are not concerned with the history here as much as we are with epiphany, which transcend time and space. **Please read Luke 9:28-36**

Several years ago, my wife was working in Peru in South America, researching the World Heritage site of Machu Picchu. Machu Picchu, as some of you know, is this ancient village built way on the top of a high mountain peak deep in the Andean mountains. Many say that while it was once an ancient retreat for Incan royalty, it was abandoned during the Spanish conquest. Yet still today it remains one of the most spectacular places, shrouded in mystery.

Some scholars believe that because of its particular location, it also served as an ancient religious site. If you have ever seen it or even traveled there, you might be able to imagine why. When the clouds part, they reveal this ancient village coming down from the sky as much as it’s reaching toward it. It’s hard to even imagine how anyone could have built such a place in such a place. It’s no wonder that it has become the destination for sojourners from all over the world making pilgrimages through this vast and rugged mountain range up to the peak that stands just about as close as you can get to the heavens.

There’s one particular stone at Machu Picchu that seems to draw most of the spiritual attention. The stone is called “*Intihuatana*” which, because of its exact location and position on this mountain top, it’s believed to be the hub of some transcendent, Divine power. Pilgrims from all over the world make their way to this stone in order to feel and to experience its power. For those in search of such a thin place, this is a reliable point where earth and heaven meet.

On the day that we approached this stone, there were people surrounding it, feeling the presence, taking in the power. We made our way through the crowds and (to be honest) I tried to feel something but couldn't. Maybe I wasn't spiritually awake enough to see it or maybe it had to do with the rope that was hung around it.

There in the middle of an ancient village carved into the top of the world, far from modern civilization, there was this rope that guarded people from getting too close to a rock. It wasn't there because the power of the stone was too holy. The rope surrounded the stone to protect it. Apparently, a few years before, a local beer company went up the mountain to film a beer commercial. While they were there, a piece of filming equipment fell and took a small chip out of this large stone. There was an outcry and reaction from the community, so much that they decided that they should protect it from anymore alterations - to guard it. So they roped it off, to keep it safe, assuring that nothing else would alter the stone – that from now on, nothing would change.

When Jesus took Peter and John and James up the mountain, they went to pray. And when Jesus did, the disciples couldn't miss the Divine presence. While he was praying, Jesus “caught fire from within.” His face changed and his clothes became dazzling white and before they could rub their eyes of sleep, the glory of God had tripled. All of the sudden, alongside Jesus the Messiah was Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the prophet – it was the Mount Rushmore of the faith – the law, the prophet, the messiah – all “alive in the present, as if time were nothing but a veil to be parted and stepped through.”²

Just as the party was breaking up, Peter wanted to hang on, to hold everything as it was so that nothing would slip away. “Master,” he said to Jesus, “it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” The dwellings he requested were tents, or tabernacles, the same used during the Jewish Festival of the Booths, a celebration to remember the past wilderness wanderings of the exodus. Peter wanted to freeze the moment, to celebrate the past, to memorialize it, to tie a rope around this divine presence so that nothing would change.

I don't know about you but I can identify with Peter. When we experience those “thin places” in our lives, when we are awakened to experience the presence of God so fully that we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is good for us to be there. And (understandably) we want to hold on, to freeze time, to protect those moments, those places, to keep them safe, memorialized, so that nothing will change.

When Amy and I were first married, we had moved to Lexington, Kentucky and wanted to set some roots down so we looked to buy a house. We looked all over town and (around the time we finally decided just to rent), we stumbled on this house and it was perfect. It was a small, historic house, downtown, a small yard. And we knew that it was good for us to be there. It was our first house together, where we experienced what it meant to be husband and wife, where our first child was born, where we hosted new and old friends and we became a family and it became a home.

When we came to Charlotte that house became the hardest place to leave. Old friendships we could continue to build on but the house? But in order to move forward

we had to sell it. It turns out that it wasn't just the economy that prevented the sale. According to our agent, noting now some two and a half years later, it was because we "priced it emotionally." Some twice as much as it was worth. Which was just our way of tying a rope around it, memorializing the past so that no one would touch it – so that nothing would change. Maybe you've had a similar experience.

The house where you've raised your children, buried your elders, received those late night calls and heard the good news of weddings and births, that place that will always be the mountain top where you have spent more years than you care to remember straddling heaven and earth and, by now, it is a part of who you are. It's your home. But now that your kids are gone and that big empty place is getting to be more to manage and those old neighbors are...well... getting younger, maybe it's time to move on. But it is hard to imagine how downsizing to a smaller house can possibly make another home.

Or a grown child you might still treat like a child because, frankly, to see them as an adult means that you have to let go of the old relationship in order to receive the new one. And what does that do to your identity as a parent as a spouse? What does that say about our role in life? That's scary because, like Peter and the disciples, you find yourself overshadowed by a cloud of uncertainty and you can't quite see what that would look like – you've never done that before.

Or the ministry of this church – "the mountain top" where we have all felt and seen and experienced the Divine in and around us and we want to hold on to the ways, the vessels, the rock where God's presence has touched us, transformed us, unmasked our true selves. But now with new leadership, a new vision of what could be, a new energy to listen to Christ...that's all good but really? And the cloud of uncertainty brings questions: How could it be better? What will we have to sacrifice? And fear gets the best of us – rightfully so – because there is a lot at stake.

Luke tells us specifically that Peter was out of earshot of the conversation between Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Watching the great figures of the past and present from a distance, what Peter couldn't hear (or rather) what he couldn't see, was that they were speaking about Jesus' "departure." A word translated from the original Greek term for "exodus." And they spoke of it not as something that would happen to him but as something he would accomplish.

Up on "the mountain," with Moses and Elijah and Jesus, God was revealing a larger story that was not over. "Like Moses before him, Jesus was going to set God's people free, only it was not bondage to pharaoh they needed freeing from this time, it was bondage of their own fear of [the clouds of] sin and death, which crippled them worse than any chains ever had...So God planned another exodus for them – in Jerusalem this time,"³ – where a cross would forever be the point where they would walk right through the veil once again to be so saturated with the presence of God that their hearts would crack wide open, and they would be unmasked and transformed to their more essential selves.

The journey Peter wanted to memorialize and freeze was not over. God was on the move. And just as Peter started to tie a rope around God, a cloud overshadowed him with a voice – a promise and a command, “This is my son, my Chosen, listen to him.” And before they knew it, the disciples were alone with Jesus, walking down the mountain, into a world of illness yet to be cured, lepers that were still banned from society, the paralyzed who did not know they would walk and sinners who did not know that they were forgiven. AT least for now, the space between heaven and earth grew wide while they faced the unknown with the obscure and radical hope that the curtain would (one day, not to far from now) be pulled back, rolled away, even torn in two so that the space between Heaven and earth would disappear once and for all.

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote that, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

Throughout the season of Epiphany, we have glimpsed who Jesus is, his power, his love, his forgiveness. We have been reminded of the moments in our lives when we have seen the glorious truth stand before us – when we have touched that reality - and we celebrate those moments because they are sacred. However, in those “thin places,” just as we are transformed, we are pulled in, surrounded and commanded to participate in that continuing story.

This next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday and the beginning of the season of Lent. In these 40 days we will turn to focus on what it means to faithfully “practice discipleship.” This will take us down the mountain into the valley of our humanity and the world around us. And as it does, by grace, we carry the Good News that “Faithfulness is not achieved by freezing a moment, [by tying a rope around the past] but by following Christ in confidence that God is leading and that what lies ahead is even greater than what we’ve already experienced.”⁴

May God grant us the courage and the grace to live our lives as if that is true. Amen.

¹ Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. (San Francisco: HarperCollins) 1998, p. 155-6.

² Taylor, Barbara-Brown, “Dazzling Darkness (Luke 9:28-36),” *The Christian Century*, Feb 4-11, 1998.

³ Ibid, I am indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor for this movement in the sermon as well as this theological insight.

⁴*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol IX (Nashville: Abington Press), p. 207.