

WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.11.2018



Mountain Companions

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.

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One of the most formative experiences in my faith were the weeks I spent at the Montreat Youth Conference in the mountains of North Carolina. I spent five summers in Montreat in my high school years (I cheated, and went the summer before my freshman year, as well as the summer after I graduated). As an adult, I served on two different planning teams – groups that planned and ran the youth conference. I found this to be as rewarding as attending the conference as a youth.

Without fail, on Friday night – the last night of the conference – it didn't matter what the Scripture was...the theme of the sermon was the same: "now it is time to go back down the mountain," the preacher would say. "We've made some special memories this week. We've grown closer to God and we've expanded our faith – but you can't stay on the mountain top! You've got to live what we learned up here – down there – in the real world."

Every. Friday. Night.

Get ready to head back down the mountain.

My first season of ministry was with youth – and as a result, I have been on a lot of youth



mission trips: to immigrant farms in southern Florida, trips to Mexico, trips to Malawi, Africa, two weeks as a part of the Appalachian Service Project, New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina recovery, and a host of local projects. Every time, on that last night of the trip while the group circled up for a final devotion, my message was always the same: “This week has been incredible...a mountain-top experience! But we can’t live up here on the mountain. We’ve got to take what we’ve learned and practice it on the flatlands. That’s where God needs us to be his witnesses – down the mountain.”

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Today’s story from the gospel of Mark is about a mountaintop experience.

It is the story of Jesus’ transfiguration – which in Mark’s gospel happens almost exactly in the middle of the story of Jesus’ life. Up to this point in the story that Mark tells about Jesus, the disciples know that Jesus is special – but what happens up on the mountain sets Jesus apart. What Peter and James and John experience on the Mount of Transfiguration is strange and surreal. Jesus changes in his appearance. He shines brightly – the fully divine part of who Jesus is becomes visible. He is joined by two of Israel’s greatest prophets – Moses and Elijah. There is a cloud on top of the mountain – reminiscent of the cloud that covered Mount Sinai when Moses received the 10 Commandments – and from the cloud, God speaks. On the mountain of Transfiguration a number of things become clear. It is clear that Jesus is the Son of God. Not just a teacher, or a good man, or a prophet. Jesus is all of those things, but more. You don’t get more esteemed company than Moses or Elijah – and it is in their presence that God’s voice echoes – “this is my Son, the beloved...” and then God says, “listen to him!”

“Listen” that is – “obey.”

It is not enough to simply hear what Jesus says.

God is clear that we are to obey what Jesus says.

I don’t know about you, but if I am Peter, James, and John that’s a lot more than I would have expected when Jesus invites you to take a hike.

I’ve preached on this passage a number of times, and have also heard my fair share of sermons about it. Usually, the message is some variation of “you can’t stay on the mountaintop.” And maybe it’s because I’ve preached and heard that sermon so much – but I’ve begun to notice another, powerful line of thought that gets baked into that predictable message...and it is not one that I think is true to the text. Sometimes, I recognize that when we say “you can’t stay on the mountaintop” what we really mean is “don’t screw it up when you leave the mountain.”

Take Peter, for instance. He’s overwhelmed by his mountaintop experience. Terrified. So what does he do? He starts building some tents. He tried to bottle up the moment. Peter is



one of those people who talks when he gets nervous – “it’s good for us to be here!” Peter exclaimed, because, the Bible says, “he did not know what to say.”

Peter didn’t even make it off the mountain before he missed the point.

And when he did get down the mountain? Catastrophe.

Not understanding Jesus’ teachings.

Not letting the little children come to see Jesus.

Arguing about who is the greatest.

Denying Jesus three times.

“This is my Son – listen to him!”

Oops.

That’s a disciple, right?

They never listen.

Yes...up on the mountaintop those disciples *almost* get it...but when they come down. Whew!
Bunch a bumbling idiots.

I think back those Friday nights at Montreat – standing with candles in hands, circling the lake. Or those last-night mission-trip devotionals, looking up at the stars in some other section of sky. “Tomorrow,” I can hear myself say, “tomorrow we go back to the real world. We’ve learned a lot. We’ve grown in our faith. We’ve made a difference. But we can’t stay here. God needs us to take these lessons and live them out in our everyday life...

...SO DON’T SCREW IT UP.”

I think I’ve been preaching the wrong message.

It’s not that disciples are perfect.

We’re human.

But think about those three that Jesus took with him up the mountain.

Yeah – Peter had some pretty big hiccups – but he was also the rock upon which Jesus founded the church. And after Jesus was raised, it was Peter who recognized the leading of the Holy Spirit that gave birth to the church.

John – John made mistakes. But when Jesus was on the cross and the other disciples had fled because they were afraid, John was there. And it was to John that Jesus entrusted his mother Mary when he died.



James – sometimes James couldn't get out of his own way. But James was also the first apostle to be martyred because of his faith in the risen Christ.

“This is my son,” God said, “the Beloved, listen to him!”

Too often, when I have read and preached on this text – I have assumed that the disciples just ignored God's command as soon as they took that first step down the mountain.

But maybe my expectations of the disciples are too low.

Because they do listen!

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I wonder why we assume that faithful discipleship is instantaneous?

I wonder why – when I read these stories about the disciples having these experiences with Jesus – I wonder why I am so judgmental about the fact that they don't all of a sudden become the perfect embodiment of all that is sacred and good. I mean, they were there! How do they not get it...immediately!

Or why – when I stand in this pulpit and preach about doing justice, and loving kindness, and walking humbly with God – those things don't just happen!

Or why – when I study these Scriptures and pray for God's guidance, and – most of the time – know what is the right path – why I don't just take it!

We're disciples.

Just a bunch of bumbling idiots.

And then I wonder where these expectations about instantaneous and perfect discipleship come from.

I wonder if – maybe – I might be assuming or projecting this idea that God is walking around perpetually disappointed in how we're doing.

That – maybe – the message is not “just don't screw it up.”

That – maybe – obeying and following Christ is not about sustaining mountaintop-levels of holiness as long as we can possibly stand it.

I wonder if this version of discipleship is a weight we place on our own shoulders because in so many other places in our lives we labor under the burden of unrealistic expectations.



Ask a parent.

Or a junior in high school who has just begun visiting colleges.

Or a highly motivated employee.

“Just don’t screw it up.”

“Be your best – all the time.”

Those expectations are heavy.

To me, they don’t sound like abundant life.

It sounds like a perpetual audition – and when God said “listen!” I don’t think a perpetual audition is what he had in mind.

Eugene Peterson described Christian discipleship as a long obedience in the same direction. How well we listen – how well we obey Christ’s commands – how well respond to Christ’s claim on our lives is not intended to be measured or tested in the moment. Discipleship is an invitation to practice obedience over a lifetime – to listen for God’s call through many seasons.

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Amanda heard me preach my “You can’t stay on the mountaintop” sermon while we were in Malawi, Africa. As her youth pastor, I was worried about the fact that she always seemed to fall for the wrong boy. I worried that she would make a bad choice by attaching herself to some young man who was less intelligent and not going anywhere fast. Today Amanda has a fellowship with an institute studying infectious disease – with the intent to take what she learns to developing nations.

Joe was in the room when I preached my “mountaintop” sermon after a week of working with the homeless in Atlanta. It wasn’t obvious to me that he heard a word of it. He was too cool for school. Too into his sporting successes to pay much attention to church or faith. He was there because he mom required him to attend. Today – Joe is a criminal defense attorney in Atlanta – in part because many of the people he met that week were trapped by a broken criminal justice system.

Lauren heard the mountaintop sermon a number of times – including at the end of a confirmation retreat when we got into a big discussion around different religions and how our misunderstanding of other religions can lead to conflict and war. Lauren was intelligent, but she was insecure. I worried that she would never trust herself to reach her potential – staying close to home and doing something safe. Today she is in an interfaith think-tank in Washington DC working for peace.



The mountaintop experiences are important.

They are illuminating.

Clarifying.

They can serve to motivate us to acts of faithfulness.

But the more I reflect on my mountaintop experiences – the more I realize that what helps me carry the message from the peak to the valley below – isn't a sermon that reminds me to not screw it up, and it's not the pressure to perform as a disciple...but it's my connection to the people who were with me in those moments.

Jesus was transfigured on the mountain.

And he trusted Peter, and James, and John as his traveling companions.

If I had to guess – those disciples' eventual faithfulness in obeying Christ's commands had less to do with what they saw that day – and more to do with the relationship that

