

WORSHIP

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Head in the Clouds, Feet on the Ground

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Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration Sunday 2019

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' —not knowing what he said. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

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I have a secret that – after six-and-a-half years of preaching from this pulpit – I feel like can now tell you.

I think what we just heard is a really strange story – and I'm not sure I know what to say about it.



I realize that might sound odd – especially if you think it is the preacher’s job to explain what the stories in the Bible mean.

If it makes you feel better, I can share some things about this passage that might help.

Like why it is significant that Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain with Jesus. Besides being some of Israel’s most beloved figures, Moses and Elijah had powerful experiences of God on the tops on mountains. Moses – as we heard in our first Scripture – encountered God on Mount Sinai, which caused his face to shine the sun. Elijah experienced God in a “still, small voice” on Mount Horeb. It makes sense that Moses and Elijah would be the prophets to join Jesus on the mountaintop.

And maybe it helps to remember that the way God spoke to the disciples from the cloud that settled over the mountain, declaring that “This is my son, my chosen. Listen to him!” is very similar to the way God laid claim to Jesus’ life when a voice came down from heaven at Jesus’ baptism: “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

It could even help to think about what happens just before and right after this passage.

Before they went up the mountain, Jesus talks openly and honestly about the fact that he will have to undergo great suffering, and rejection, and be killed. Jesus says that if any want to become his followers, they will need to deny themselves and take up their cross.

After they come down from the mountain, Jesus symbolically turns his face toward Jerusalem...he begins his journey toward that suffering and rejection that will come with the cross.

That journey – which is what we are going to focus on during Lent – begins for us this week during our Ash Wednesday service at 7:00 in the sanctuary.

Perhaps all of this aids in your understanding of what went on in this scene on the top of the mountain...this event that we call the “Transfiguration.” But I have to be honest and tell you that I’m not exactly sure of what it all means – because it is a strange and mysterious story.



I'll tell you a mistake I've made in preaching on this passage before. It's probably a mistake that came from feeling like if I was going to stand here and talk for 20 minutes, I might want to have something to say.

The mistake I've made in preaching this passage is that I blamed the disciples for being confused.

I've pointed my finger at Peter and criticized him for wanting to bottle up the experience by building three dwellings for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.

I've poked fun at the fact that Peter couldn't seem to stop talking – babbling on and on and “not knowing what he said.”

I've found fault with the fact that after they hiked back down the mountain – fresh from that incredible experience of seeing Jesus transfigured before them – Peter, James, and John still don't get it. They still miss the point. They're still surprised by what ends up happening in Jerusalem. They still deny and abandon Jesus in his moment of need.

What a waste of a mountaintop experience!

After all, mountaintop experiences are supposed clarify what we believe.

They are supposed to help us sort things out.

See the road ahead.

Discover what it means to follow Jesus.

Peter, James and John were privileged enough to have had that experience.

So how did they not have the faith to understand??

Because that's the point of faith, right?

To understand?

To know what we believe and how we are supposed to apply it in real life?

If we are confused – or unclear – well, doesn't that mean we don't have enough faith? That we haven't quite got it? We haven't yet arrived?

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Today is Senior Recognition Sunday – and (at the 11:00 service/in a little while) I will call the names of 18 high school seniors who will graduate in a few short



months. Some of these Seniors have spent their entire lives in this church. They are about to finish what Deacon Thomas Cook dubbed “the full pull” – from baptism, to preschool, to Vacation Bible School, to getting their third-grade Bibles; completing their catechism, confirmation, mission trips, and youth group.

It was close to 25 years ago, but I well remember what it was like as a high school senior when I was close to finishing my full-pull at the church of my childhood. As the preacher’s kid, I might have even had a double-full-pull. The church was a second home. I had done all the things – and I loved them: mission trips, family retreats, five straight summers of Montreat Youth Conferences near Asheville, North Carolina. Through my experience of being a part of a community of faith at MorningStar Presbyterian Church I could point to a host of mountaintop experiences.

I’m not sure where it came from – but as I got close to graduation and the realization that, as I headed off to college, it really was time to take responsibility for my faith and claim it for myself – I remember feeling somewhat guilty, or worried, that in spite of all of those wonderful experiences I had in church, I still had so many questions...so many things I didn’t understand about who God was and what following Christ was really supposed to look like...so many things that felt unfinished when it came to what I believed.

It was strange. Here I was – supposedly ready to step into adulthood – equipped with learning and experiences of faith – and I felt like a fraud because I didn’t have it figured out.

Like I say, I don’t know where I had picked it up, but in my mind I had equated faith with understanding – with certainty – with the absence of confusion.

And because I did not fully understand...I was not 100% certain...and I often felt confused...it followed that I must not have a strong faith. Right?

I know a lot of people who share the same burden; people who have – somehow – from their church, at their home, through their school – come to the conclusion that faith requires certainty...the absence of confusion. It can be a heavy weight to carry.



I think about the high school seniors from our church – and, literally, how much more they will know about our world than we do by the time that they have high school seniors of their own.

I think about how the 18 people on the back of today's bulletin will learn to navigate the cross currents of change – as they come of age during a time when we are figuring out what it means to live together on a planet that is growing more crowded, and in a city that is becoming more global, and in a culture that has less and less of a majority because it has more and more diversity...of race, ethnicity, and religion.

If we've created an expectation that to have faith is to have an easy answer for how to navigate that world, then I think we are setting ourselves up for disappointment, because I am not sure that is a kind of faith that people can – or want – to practice.

And, thankfully, I don't think that is the kind of faith the Bible encourages us to have.

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If we look closely in the Bible, mountaintop experiences are not as simple as we might imagine. It's true that mountaintops are often the places where people have an encounter with God. But there is more going on than just getting clear about what to do and how to live once you come back down from the mountain.

Abraham took his son Isaac up the mountain. You remember that story. It was a complicated journey. Abraham was obedient, but far from certain.

Moses experienced God on the mountain. He received direction, but he was afraid.

After his resurrection, Jesus assembled his disciples on the top of the mountain. "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me," he said. "Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations..." And – the Bible says – on the mountaintop that day, those disciples worshiped him...and some doubted.

In today's passage, Peter, James, and John followed Jesus up the mountain – and what they saw was amazing...and mysterious...and magnificent. They heard the voice of God. And they were confused.



Uncertainty. Fear. Doubt. Confusion.

These things are not the enemies of faith. They are the companions of it.

I find it comforting – especially in those seasons of my life when I feel like I should have more answers than I do – that even those who stood in the presence of God on the mountaintop knew what it was to have questions.

I find grace in that. And strength.

Because when it comes to having faith – and practicing it – it seems that what matters more than certainty and perfect clarity – is our awareness of the fact that we live and are loved and are claimed by the one who is holy. The one who broke into a world of darkness in order to fill it with light. And who calls us to follow – not because we fully understand – but because we trust.

I don't know all the details – but I can tell you that following that path leads to life. Abundant life.

