

WORSHIP

Sermon | 2.23.2020



No Pressure

The Reverend Pen Peery

Matthew 17:1-8

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.

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Our second Scripture is intended to remind us of the Old Testament scene we just heard about when Moses met God face to face on the top of Mount Saini to receive the Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, Jesus takes three of his disciples up a mountain where he has a divine encounter. This is the story of what we call the Transfiguration. Listen with me for the word of God from the 17th chapter of Matthew's gospel.

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The mountain where Jesus likely took Peter, James, and John is called Mount Tabor. It rises up high above the terrain – a solitary, rocky peak in the midst of some rolling hills. When you reach the summit, one of the things first things you notice is that the temperature is a good 10-15 degrees cooler than at the foot below.

Standing on the top of the mountain, if you look northwest, you can see Nazareth – the town where Jesus grew up. It's about five miles. If you look northeast, on a clear day, you can see the shimmering water of the Sea of Galilee – about 10 miles away. It was around the Sea of Galilee where Peter and James and John met Jesus – where they saw Jesus teach, and heal, and perform miracles. It was around those waters where they decided to drop what they were doing and start a life as Jesus's followers.

From the top of the mountain, if you face south – things look a lot different. More ominous. There is a huge valley – the Meggido Valley – flat with fields of green. But past that, the terrain begins to turn rocky and dusty and brown. This is the way toward Jerusalem – a wilderness road that follows the meandering banks of the Jordan River that runs through desert terrain.

There's not a way to tell if Peter and James and John knew – standing on that mountain – that the next chapter in their following of Jesus was going to take place in the south – on the way toward Jerusalem. To that point, following Jesus had been relatively easy – sticking close to the comforts of home in and around the villages that dotted the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee – where Jesus had been focused on teaching and helping and healing.

But if we were to keep reading in Matthew's gospel where we left off, we would see that the road ahead was one that contained conflict, and difficult decisions,



and – eventually – the cross. Following Jesus down the other side of the mountain on the road toward Jerusalem took a different kind of courage, and commitment.

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This Wednesday we will begin that journey down the other side of the mountain as we begin the season of Lent.

We will start our Lenten journey with two opportunities for worship on Ash Wednesday – here in the sanctuary at noon, or for a shorter service in the Fresco Lobby that evening at 7:00.

On Sundays this Lent we are going to spend our time in worship exploring the theme of discipleship – focused on what following Jesus looks like. Our guide for this Lenten journey of discipleship is going to be one of the earliest voices in the Christian faith – a man named Augustine – who lived in 4th century – and whose thoughts on discipleship continue to be relevant so many generations later.

But today – while we are still on the mountain – before we start that journey toward the cross – I wanted to say a word about what we mean – and what we don't mean – when we talk about discipleship.

Because I think, sometimes, when we hear about our call to discipleship we get a little overwhelmed. Sometimes, I think we confuse the call to be Jesus' disciple with a demand to be perfect. Sometimes, I think we view our calling to follow Jesus...in ways, yes, that ask us to practice courage, and to live differently than the world around us, and to make sacrifices...but also in ways that can feel like an impossible expectation.



While those three disciples were gathered with Jesus on the top of the mountain, something amazing happened. Mysterious. Holy. Jesus' face shone like the sun. The prophets of old appeared: Moses and Elijah. Then came a cloud – where God spoke to Peter and James and John: “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased, listen to him!”

I've preached a lot of sermons on this Scripture – and most of the time it kind of goes like this: in the face of such a strange and transcendent event, I joke about how Peter proves what a bunch of bumbling idiots the disciples really are by not understanding what is going on and trying to build three dwellings on the top of the mountain so they can just capture the moment, bottle it up, and treasure it forever.

I've often preached that Peter and James and John were confused.

But what Matthew says is that they were afraid.

Of what?

Afraid of being in the presence of God? Maybe.

Afraid of what was in store of them as they listened to and followed Jesus along the journey of discipleship? Perhaps.

But, this morning, I wonder if part of why those disciples were afraid was because they knew that even if they **tried** to follow Jesus, they wouldn't measure up – they wouldn't be able to meet the expectation – they would disappoint.

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“Pendleton – I'm not mad, I'm disappointed.”

Whew.



Those were the words I least wanted to hear in my formative years.

Earlier this week, Robert, Anna, and I were talking about effective parental discipline and we found that – growing up – we all had a mutual fear of hearing those words coming from our parent’s lips.

I would guess that your pastors are not alone in that.

Most achievement-oriented, faithful, earnest Presbyterians tend to be motivated by a call to responsibility. We appreciate expectations – especially when we meet them. It’s a way we organize our lives – by satisfying one expectation after another – which generally leaves us in a good and stable place in the world.

There’s a shadow-side to living your life that way, however. The expectations don’t stop. The pressure builds. The purpose or the point of our lives...who we are and who we are called to be...gets lost in chasing after one expectation after another.

I’ve got a teenager now – and I have peeked around the corner of what is to come:

- Pressure to get the grades
- Pressure to have the right kind of friends
- Pressure to curate the right social media profile
- Pressure to do all the right things beyond school

And I know what comes next:

- Pressure to land the internship
- Pressure to graduate with honors

Then there is:

- Pressure to make in impression at work
- Pressure to hit the quarterly goal



Pressure to live in the right neighborhood

Pressure to maintain the right lifestyle

Everywhere we turn we bump into expectations: at school, at work, in the neighborhood, from family, on the non-profit board, from our friends...at the church.

When you are responsible and accomplished you can generally keep piling more and more expectations on and managing through – even looking like you’ve got it all together.

But don’t you know it makes you tired?

And don’t you know what you really want – almost more than meeting all of those expectations – is to not fail;
to not disappoint?

There’s a reason why things like anxiety, and depression, and suicide, and substance abuse are increasing year-to-year...which betrays, I think undeniably...a mental health crisis.

It’s the pressure we live under.

It’s the expectations we internalize.

It’s how hard we push ourselves to maintain that myth of perfection.

So what I want to say is that I can guess – in fact, I know – that sometimes in church when we talk about discipleship – the call to courageously follow Jesus – sometimes it can feel like another opportunity for us to confirm just how disappointing we really are.

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I don’t know if the fear that Peter and James and John felt when they were on top



of that mountain, being told by God to listen to Jesus, looking out onto the difficult path where discipleship would lead...I don't know if what they felt was a fear of disappointing their teacher and Lord.

But as we stand on the top of the mountain today, preparing to talk about the journey of discipleship, I admit that fear is something I often feel when I consider the question of what it means for me to follow.

And so I get why Peter wanted to hang out for a while. Build some dwellings. Savor the moment. At least – to that point – Jesus hadn't had much of a reason to be disappointed in Peter. At least – to that point – Peter hadn't underperformed.

With everything that happened on top of that mountain – as Peter understood more clearly that this man he had committed to follow was not just a good teacher and a compassionate healer – but that Jesus was something more:

someone who was continuing the work of the **Prophets**,
someone whose life was **bridging the gap** between heaven and earth,
someone who had been **anointed** to speak for God –

when Peter got a better glimpse of who Jesus was, I can imagine that Peter may have also felt a corresponding uptick in his own inadequacy, his own insecurity...his own doubts about whether he could be a good disciple. And I feel that.

But *before* Jesus chose to bring Peter and James and John up the mountain where he would be transfigured – and *before* Jesus would lead those disciples down the road to Jerusalem where things would get more difficult and more complicated –

before any of that, back when they were just fishermen around that shimmering seashore, Jesus saw his disciples for who they were: human, broken, capable, conflicted, a mixture of faithfulness and sinfulness – depending on the day.



And Jesus called them anyway – not in spite of the ways they were imperfect – but because he loved them – and promised to be with them to the end of the age.

We spend so much of our time – and our energy – trying to live up to the expectations of the world around us: we push ourselves to be...what...better? More successful? Stronger? More powerful?

Where does that lead – except to disappointment and feeling alone?

Being a disciple of Jesus is something different.

It is not a life-long audition for God's affection and reward.

It is an *invitation* to a different way of life. An abundant way of life that is marked by promise, and purpose, and joy. It's a way of life that is shared by the companionship of other disciples on the journey – and, importantly, by the presence of Christ whom we follow.

No, it's not always easy.

It asks a lot of us – it stretches us in ways that are often uncomfortable.

No, we don't do it perfectly.

There are plenty occasions to fail.

And when we fail – grace abounds; God's love remains unconditional; our discipleship card doesn't get revoked.

As followers of Jesus – we've already been made right.

Our worth doesn't depend on our effort or our accomplishments.

Doesn't sound like a gift? Like a refreshing way to be?

What God asks is that we have the courage to live like we believe it.

