
Exodus 34:29-35
Luke 9:28-43

This week we hear two stories of Moses and Jesus high on mountaintops, encountering God, and having their visible features transformed by the experience. These stories are a little bit mysterious—it’s hard to fully imagine or understand what these mystical experiences of shining light might have looked like—but even if you have to stretch your imagination a little bit, these stories give us a vivid visual image of the internal transformation that certainly happens in both of these moments. In Exodus, Moses is seen shining radiantly as he descends Mount Sinai with the tablets of the covenant in hand. In Luke, when Jesus is seen alongside the figures of Moses and Elijah, the appearance of his face changes, and his clothes suddenly described as “dazzling.” In many ways, these two moments look like quintessential “God moments”—everything is beautiful, the air is crisp and clear, the voice of God is audible and unmistakable. How does it feel to encounter these stories of grandeur in the midst of a week that has felt far from grand?

This week we have been watching with fear and uncertainty as Russian forces invade Ukraine and war that has been brewing for a long time comes into reality. I’ve seen images and videos of suffering that are hard to wrap my mind around, where distance disconnects us even as these images and stories remind us of the reality. People flee their homes, separate from family members suddenly, and face the trauma of war that many of us can’t fully understand. Closer to home, this week leaders in Texas and Florida took steps to deny healthcare and education to youth in the LGBTQ+ community, and I’ve watched transgender friends retell their stories of how having just one teacher, doctor, parent, or pastor listen and affirm their experience made all the difference for their own health and wellbeing. Now many of us fear for queer and trans youth who might not have the opportunity to openly make some of those connections. The pandemic rages on, members of our church community move through difficult diagnoses, the winter is cold and dark, and many of you are navigating personal challenges I can only imagine. How’s that for an optimistic start to a Transfiguration sermon? Depending on how you look at it, this might be the worst time to encounter Jesus’s shiny, radiant mountaintop moment...or maybe it is the best time.

Despite the sparkly imagery, neither Moses nor Jesus are navigating particularly easy circumstances in Exodus or in Luke when we hear these stories. Moses has been traveling through the desert for far too long, trying to lead his people with some sense of clarity, but mistakes and setbacks show up at every turn. Once Moses descends the mountain with these covenant tablets, shining face and all, it won’t take very long for the people to re-focus on other things. Jesus, in this transfiguration story is in the midst of traveling, teaching, and healing. He has been poorly received by many, and we are told on the mountaintop that the shining figures of Moses and Elijah speak with him about his upcoming departure at Jerusalem, and which we will remember as a church in seven weeks on Good Friday. So the mountaintop is certainly shiny, but all around it hard realities are present.

We all have mountaintop moments in so many segments of life: a fulfilling project at work, a season of connected bliss in a relationship, a certain vacation or holiday that feels like a respite from overwhelming burdens, news of a cancer remission, news of new birth, the relief of sharing your full

gender identity or sexuality and being celebrated, the joy of meeting up with an old friend and picking up right where you left off. Often I find myself in those mountaintop moments almost afraid to fully enjoy them. Anticipatory worries start sneaking into my mind because I know at some point I'll have to come back down the other side of the mountain. Conflict will return, vacation will end, news will turn frightening, the next hard thing will come to pass.

In the transfiguration story, Peter often gets a bad rap for wanting to build three dwellings at the top of the mountain. But what a profoundly relatable thing to want to do. When I'm in a moment of goodness, joy, comfort, or peace, when it feels like the light is shining all around, my clothes look dazzling, and things are clear and comfortable, I yearn to make that feeling more permanent. It's a natural part of being human, and of living in a society. If we can build up institutions of stability around the things that bring us comfort, who wouldn't want to do that? I think Peter is one of the most relatable characters in the Bible, for his doubts, for his uncertainty, and here for his desire to create some sort of structure that will let them all stay in a shiny mountaintop moment for a little while longer. Part of the problem is that so often when we create institutions for our comfort, those of us with power and privilege get to keep a spot on the mountain, while others are cast back down—transgender youth, people of color, people in countries with less military might. Some of us get to keep our comfort for a little longer, but we can't live on the mountaintop forever.

Back in our story, before Peter can even finish his proposition that they set up camp here, a huge cloud rolls in, everything is obscured in shadows, and then clarity returns through the audible voice of God saying "This is my son, my chosen, listen to him." It parallels the way God speaks at Jesus's baptism, and the rest of the scene is left in silence. We don't hear Jesus rebuke Peter, but we also don't see them building dwellings on the mountaintop. Today, when we want to set up shop in the midst of a mountaintop moment, to hope our relationships will always be easy, or war will always be continents away, God continues to whisper the same statement to us. Not a rebuke for our instinctual hope that things will never change, but a reminder that when we do have to come back down from the mountain, we can listen to God, and we can follow Jesus.

When Jesus moves to leave the mountaintop he has to turn his face toward Jerusalem and begin the long journey toward his death. The upcoming wilderness journey will be emotionally exhausting for him and for all those who love him. But even more immediately, as soon as Jesus comes down from the mountain he encounters new instances of suffering, loss, and difficulty that he immediately has to respond to. This morning we read a few more verses than we sometimes do, because the next story to follow the transfiguration is important. The very next day after coming down from the mountain, we're told that a great crowd meets Jesus and his followers. Out of the crowd comes a terrified father searching for healing for his child. He yells and pleads "Teacher, I beg you, look at my son, he is my only child."

As I read that verse this week while watching news footage of terrified parents in Ukraine, it hit me harder than it ever has before. The image of this father's fear and uncertainty feels more present. Just after being in a shiny mountaintop moment where God Godself claimed Jesus as God's son, Jesus meets another parent naming who his child is and yearning for help. Jesus comes down from the mystical mountaintop moment and right into the thick of human suffering. He doesn't shy away and he doesn't put himself on a pedestal, but he meets this parent in his fear and he brings what healing he can, even as Jesus begins his own wilderness journey toward death. When I look around at the world this week and feel fear and despair, I have to trust that Jesus comes down from the mountain with us and joins us on the road.

This is the last Sunday before we enter the season of Lent, which will begin this week with Ash Wednesday and carry us up to Easter. At First Pres our Lenten theme this year is Wilderness | Welcome, and I think it's going to challenge us over the coming weeks. What does it mean to welcome the

Down From the Mountaintop

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wilderness when we have been in the midst of uncertainty for so very long? What does it look like to offer welcome in the *midst* of wilderness moments, even when we can't offer certainty or stability?

One of the most formative books in my theological development was *Sisters in the Wilderness* by womanist theologian Delores Williams. For Williams, the development of resources, skills, and endurance for survival is a central piece of how we experience God in the midst of suffering—without glorifying suffering. She calls us to the perspective of Black women in particular and those marginalized on multiple axes, to consider how God shows up in the midst of our hardest moments to help make a way out of no way. Williams draws most heavily on the story of Hagar, the woman enslaved by Abraham, and the mother of his first son, Ishmael. Hagar never gets to have her own glorious mountaintop moment, but does draw near to God and reclaims her own power when God speaks to her and hears her by a life-saving well in the wilderness. Hagar doesn't experience a sparkly moment with dazzling clothes, but God shows up, hears her, and meets her with the tools of survival in the thick of it all. From that perspective, I cling to the image of Jesus descending from his dazzling mountaintop moment, meeting anxious parents, desperate people, and fearful communities in the midst of their wilderness journeys.

When we travel through wilderness moments it is so easy to say, "It's not fair! I want to go back to the mountaintop! Why didn't we build dwellings there while we had the chance?" But even though we heard God on the mountaintop, God didn't stay put there. God goes with us as we descend from the shiny, radiant heights and come back to reality to face conflict, distrust, division, and even war. God is the one who can transfigure our hearts, transfigure our spirits, and fill us with hope and prophetic imagination to create possibilities where we had given up hope. So we come down from the mountain. We step out into the wilderness. But we don't journey alone.

Thanks be to God.