

February 11, 2024
“Back Down the Mountain”
2 Kings 2:2-12 / Mark 9:2-9
Pastor Tim

So again, in a liturgical context, we wrap up the season of Epiphany today as we prepare to enter the season of Lent.

Remember that Epiphany – or Three Kings' Day, Día de Los Tres Reyes in Latin cultures – primarily commemorates, at least in the Western Church, the visit of the magi to the new-born Jesus. A sign that God's incarnation had been revealed, manifested, to the whole world.

Epiphany also takes in Jesus' baptism, the manifestation of Jesus as God's own – the first time we find the divine voice declaring from the heavens that Jesus is God's beloved. Both divine and human – or as William Sloane Coffin often described it, both window to God and mirror to humanity.

It also commemorates Jesus' first miracle – turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Again, Jesus as both divine and human.

And so this Sunday each year, the mystical story of the Transfiguration serves as the perfect bridge between Epiphany and Lent. Epiphany is in many ways the mountain top, but the journey through Lent – and indeed through life – requires going back down the mountain.

To recap, the story – at least in Mark and Matthew’s accounts – begins with the phrase “six days later.” Luke says eight days. In any case, the reference point in all three is Jesus foretelling to his disciples, for the first time, his death and resurrection.

One of those disciples, Peter, isn’t having it. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time now. He’s the one they dropped everything to follow. They’ve been through a lot together, so we can understand Jesus’ morbid prediction not landing too well.

Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him. We don’t know what he says, but we do know what Jesus says in response. With all the disciples gathered, he rebukes Peter right back: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

At our most recent Spirituality on Tap, we mostly talked about the notion of God’s will. I wish I would’ve thought to add this text to our discussion – like, how do we differentiate between divine things and human things? How do we?

Well, back to the story of Transfiguration, who better than Jesus to help us answer such a question – again, the One whom we experience as somehow both divine and human.

Jesus follows his rebuke with a message not JUST to his disciples, but to the whole crowd that’s gathered around them: “If any want to

become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up THEIR cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel (as we reflected together last week), will save it.”

That's right BEFORE the Transfiguration story.

So back to the recap. Six or eight days later, after all that, Jesus heads up the mountain – a “high mountain” at that. We know that Jesus often retreated to the mountains to pray, to be away from the growing crowds and alone with God. Recharge the batteries. Refill the tank. After all, he was human.

But this time he takes three disciples with him – Peter, James and John. And he's immediately transfigured. His CLOTHES become dazzling white (how often do you hear the word, dazzling!) – DAZZLING white, whiter than bleach could make them. His COMPANY becomes historic, a Jewish who's who as both Moses and Elijah suddenly appear with him.

And while those three are talking together, the three disciples are taking it all in. They're terrified because, OF COURSE they're terrified.

Peter doesn't know what else to say or do, so he suggests pitching tents so they can stick around for a while. Better here than back

down the mountain. Better than here than back down the mountain with all that talk about suffering and dying.

But then we get the divine voice. Same as with Jesus' baptism, declaring, affirming, now for the second time, that Jesus is God's own, God's beloved.

"Listen to him," the voices says from the clouds above. Listen to him.

And with that, it's just Jesus and the disciples again. No cloud. No Moses. No Elijah. No dazzling white clothes. Just Jesus and the three disciples.

I picture the disciples whispering to each other, "Did that just happen? Were we just dreaming?"

But before they have a chance to process, they head right back down the mountain. They're not ready to go, but ready or not, they do. Because Jesus does.

For some reason Jesus tells them not to tell anyone what they've just seen, but how could they anyway? Who would believe them?

If the mountain, the mountain top, is a metaphor for divine revelation, then the valleys below are metaphor for human reality.

Jesus models, again and again, the importance of making and taking space – regular, consistent space – to pray, to retreat (allow

me to insert here a shameless plug for our Spring Retreat – once again, the first full weekend in June at Pendle Hill!) ... to recharge, to reconnect with “divine things.” To listen for the voice of God within and around us. And to listen for the voice of God, I believe, is at its heart about reaffirming and reclaiming our belovedness. Our own and each other’s.

Because the voice of God always, and ONLY, speaks out of love. Unconditional love.

So it’s important, critical, to commit time and space to the mountain – at least figuratively, if not also literally. To open our spirits up to the possibility of divine transformation, and our lives up to the possibility of divine transfiguration.

It’s vital for a meaningful and sustainable spiritual life.

But Jesus’ life, and indeed his eventual death, was about going back down the mountain. Bringing the divine affirmation, the divine insight, the divine revelation back down to our shared human reality.

What the three disciples witnessed on that mountain top was God’s glory – which is to say, the light of God’s full and encompassing presence. Manifested in Jesus, in Jesus’ holy gathering with Moses and Elijah.

But as the 2nd-century church father, St. Irenaeus, famously declared, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” The glory of God is a human being fully alive!

That is a description of abundant life – the life which God desires for all of us, and the life Jesus said he came that we might all have.

Abundant life that requires regular, frequent retreats to the mountain, but is ultimately and vitally cultivated back down the mountain in the valleys below.

That is our calling.

The disciples are terrified. They don't want to go back down the mountain, back to reality, because they now know what's coming. They are afraid to lose the One they've left their lives behind to follow, and they can't imagine their lives – much less abundant lives – without him. They aren't ready to let go.

The same is true for Elisha, in our other reading.

The end is near for the prophet Elijah, Elisha's mentor. In similarly dramatic fashion to the story of Transfiguration, Elijah is about to be taken up to heaven by a whirlwind. And Elisha is having none of it!

Three times Elijah tells Elisha to stay put while he goes on to the place God has sent him – first to Bethel, then to Jericho and then to

the Jordan. And three times Elisha says, "As the HOLY ONE lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you."

He is not ready to let Elijah go. The prophets at each place remind Elisha that today's the day when Elijah will go to God, and each time Elisha tells them to keep silent.

"I know, I know, I know, shut up!" Elisha knows, you know, but Elisha really doesn't want to know. He's too afraid to know. He's not ready to let go. He's not ready to live without Elijah. He's not ready to face reality.

Safely across the Jordan River, which Elijah parts with a mantle, ala Moses, Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him before he goes.

Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit – that doesn't mean twice Elijah's spirit, but the portion of inheritance traditionally offered to the first-born son. Elijah is like a father to Elisha.

You can hear Elisha, with tears in his eyes and trembling in his voice, holding on. Afraid to let go. Afraid to go on without Elijah.

But hear Elijah's response.

"You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not."

In other words, if – and only if – you face the reality that I am being taken from you, the reality that you will be going on without me in the flesh, you will indeed receive a double share of my spirit. My spirit will go with you.

This, friends, is a story about grief and fear. Grief about losing ones we love, and who loved us; fear that we won't be able to go on without them. Unwilling or unable, or both, to let go.

Grief is like that. Anticipatory grief, when we know what's coming, is like that.

I know, I know, I know, but I don't want to know. I'm not ready to let go. I'm afraid to live my life without my loved one.

At every funeral I officiate, I quote the poet Mary Oliver, who writes to "To live in this world you must be able to do three things; to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go; to let it go."

To let it go.

The wisdom of Elijah, here, is that if and when we are able to let go of our fear, we will be able to face into our grief. Open ourselves up to properly grieve; to properly – fully – feel all that we feel. God created those feelings for a reason.

Abundant life is not pain-free; it's about living as fully as we can into the fullness of our lives. And in so doing, opening ourselves up to receive and rejoice in God's Spirit, and in the spirits of those who have gone before us. Opening ourselves up to transformation. Transfiguration. New life. Abundance.

The same is true in the story of Jesus' transfiguration.

The disciples say, I know, I know, I know, but I don't want to know. We're not ready to go back down the mountain. We're too afraid to even think about going on without you, Jesus. Rabbi.

Why can't we just stay here a little longer?

Because life is ultimately lived, and shared, back down the mountain. If we let go of our fear, whatever that fear may be at any given point in our lives, we open ourselves up to face into reality. Life as it is, down in the valleys.

Reality that, of course, includes our grief for loved ones lost, or our anticipatory grief for those we are afraid to lose – family, friends, mentors. Because we cannot imagine living our lives without them. Because we're not sure we have the strength to.

And reality that, of course, includes our grief for the world in all of its beauty and brokenness. The world looks different from a distance than it does up close.

But hear Elijah's promise, God's promise, that a double portion of life-giving Spirit will be yours if you are willing and able to face into the realities within and around you. If you're willing and able to feel what you feel – going to the mountain when you need to, but ultimately going back down the mountain.

“No one lives on the top of the mountain,” writes Arthur Gordon Webster – metaphorically speaking, of course. “It's fine to go there occasionally – for inspiration, for new perspectives. But you have to come down. Life is lived in the valleys. That's where the farms and gardens and orchards are, and where the plowing and the work is done. That's where you apply the visions you may have glimpsed from the peaks.”

The visions and glory of God revealed on the mountaintop, glimpsed from the unique perspective of the mountaintop, carried down the mountain and applied in the valleys. Bringing together, as Jesus did, divinity and humanity, divine revelation and human reality, divine things and human things.

“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”

Friends, we are called back down the mountains, again and again and again – in spite of our fear, and hopefully with renewed courage to face into and fully experience our grief, knowing that we who have seen and experienced God's light and God's glory,

have everything we need to REFLECT God's light and glory, as those who are – or at least aspire to be – fully alive.

As those who open their lives up not just to the possibility, but to the PROMISE, of transfiguration; and with it, the promise that the world WILL be transfigured. So that ALL might have life, and have it abundantly.

You can do this, because you are not alone on this journey. WE can do this together, because we are not alone on this journey.

Following the One who is both window to the God of new life and unending love, and mirror to the beauty and brokenness of our shared humanity. Listen to him.

And with that, I leave you – as I have a previous Transfiguration sermon because I just like it SO much – with a blessing from Jan Richardson:

*Believe me, I know
how tempting it is
to remain inside this blessing,
to linger where everything
is dazzling
and clear.*

*We could build walls
around this blessing,
put a roof over it.
We could bring in
a table, chairs,
have the most amazing meals.*

*We could make a home.
We could stay.*

*But this blessing
is built for leaving.
This blessing
is made for coming down
the mountain.*

*This blessing
wants to be in motion,
to travel with you
as you return
to level ground.*

*It will seem strange
how quiet this blessing becomes
when it returns to earth.*

*It is not shy.
It is not afraid.
It simply knows
how to bide its time,
to watch and wait,
to discern and pray
until the moment comes
when it will reveal
everything it knows,
when it will shine forth
with all that it has seen,
when it will dazzle
with the unforgettable light you have carried*

May it be so.