

**A Good Place to Be
Transfiguration Sunday
Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner**

**Matthew 17:1-9
March 6, 2011**

There is something about mountains that capture a sense of majesty that we rarely find anywhere else. As college seniors, Erica and I travelled to Nepal to study. We had the chance to trek in the Himalayas for a week. We hiked from village to village often following a caravan of donkeys hauling goods over the Himalayas to Tibet. We didn't often reach elevations of higher than 10,000 feet in our week. This was no major expedition to Everest or anything. So the larger hills and mountains often obscured our view of the big ones. One morning we woke up at 4:00AM to summit Poon Hill. It felt much more like a mountain than a hill. At 12,000 feet, it was the highest point we would climb during the week. We struggled upward in the darkness, fighting off a mostly sleepless night and the coldest temperatures we had experienced all week. It was only a four mile hike that morning, but it was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile straight up. We reached the summit right before sunrise, the stars were as bright as I had ever seen them and there was nearly a full moon setting on the other side of the mountains. Within the first 15 minutes of standing there, the sun rose from the east and the snow capped 25000 foot mountains mesmerized us with their brightness. We realized then that we were surrounded by the earth's ceiling. Nothing connected to the natural world was higher than what was before us. It was a moment of awe and clarity.

And I think that's really what this mountain top experience is for Jesus and his three disciples, an experience of awe and clarity. For nearly three years, the disciples had been following Jesus. They'd heard parables that Jesus said were meant to confuse people. They'd seen and done miracles that could not be explained in a rational way. They'd watched Jesus take on the powers of society with no interest or attempt to grasp that kind of power. Now, up on this mountain they see plainly who and what Jesus is...the Almighty God's beloved Son, shining like the sun in the sky, the one they can trust fully and whom they should listen to.

As they stood on that mountain, Jesus was transformed from ordinary rabbi and friend, into someone flanked on either side by the greatest men of their faith, Moses and Elijah. And though

it seems that this story is about Jesus transformation, being on the mountain with him shows clearly that following Jesus requires transformation of our own. A transformative experience awaited Peter and the other disciples. You can tell that Peter is one of those guys who likes being in the presence of important people. As soon as Jesus starts to shine like the stars and Elijah and Moses show up, he's quick to want to plant some roots there. "Lord, it is good for us to be here! If you want, I'll pitch a few tents so that you and your superstar prophet friends are comfortable for a while." But before he can even finish his thought, something even more unbelievable and awesome happens...God shows up in an unmistakable voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased. Be quiet for once...and listen to him."

This was all way too much for Peter and the other two disciples. That whole idea of sticking around on top of the mountain doesn't seem so good any more. God's voice was enough to terrify the disciples. For the first time in their journey with Jesus, it was as if they realized exactly who had called them. For the first time they realized how much they mattered to God and how important they're call to follow Jesus was.

"Listen to him." That doesn't sound too hard, right. But when you listen to any one, let alone Jesus, you open yourself to another person's world, a world where you don't have all the answers or control. Listening to Jesus opens us to trust more deeply in God's ways for the world, God's desires and direction for your life, God's hope for all humanity. Simply put, listening to Jesus transforms you.

And maybe that's what's challenging and good about this story...that listening to Jesus leads us to transformation, to question the world around us, and to seek a new way of living. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 12 in the Message version, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: ... Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed

maturity in you.” Following Jesus does not leave much room for complacency or the status quo of this world. Jesus is in the business of transforming the world, and those who follow will play a part in that transformation.

You might be asking yourself, “How do we listen? How does this transformation happen?” First, it’s important to see how Peter, James and John responded in the gospel because it is undoubtedly how you and I might feel when faced with the same situation. They cowered in fear until Jesus said something, “Get up... and don’t be afraid.” Getting up prepares us to go. Not being afraid is a little bit tougher, but it’s not so much the message but who the message comes from that gives us comfort and strength to get up. *Jesus* says it, so it’s a reminder that even if we don’t have an idea of what is coming next Jesus does, and he will go ahead of us to provide the way.

I worked with a pastor a few years ago who reminded the congregation just about every week to “Pray, read your Bible, hang out with other Christians.” I would also add, and serve your neighbor. Each of these simple things instructs us in how not to be afraid and simultaneously equips us for transformation.

Scripture allows us to hear and see how God has been at work in people’s lives over centuries. It tells us the stories of God’s ongoing love affair with creation and reminds us over and over of God’s promises for us.

Praying allows us to open ourselves to God. This doesn’t mean that we have to have eloquent words that go on for paragraphs. Prayer is as much pausing in one’s day to be intentional about recognizing where God has been and seeking direction for where we might experience God next. Author, Anne Lamott says : There are really only two prayers we need: “Thank you and Help.”

Serving others allows us to see and hear God in the places of need our community. We serve the God of the cross, who will not shy away from places of people's deepest need and so when we serve others, we find Jesus in the faces of those we meet.

Spending time with other Christians provides a unique community where we can share our joys and struggles of faith. Here in community we are able to practice faith so that faith is more easily practiced in our daily lives. I had a professor in seminary who said, "Everything we do in here, is preparation for how we live life out there."

When we practice these things: prayer, reading our Bible, spending time with other Christians and service, we stand on the mountain top. It is from this vantage point that we are able see more clearly and stand in awe of our savior Jesus.

But how intentional are we as a whole church about going up the mountain together? Some of you have done this for years, in circles or other forms of small groups. But how comfortable are we praying with and for each other? Have we developed ways of reading Scripture together and making sense of it for our lives? How often do we see God in the faces of those we serve, whether it's in our daily work or our shared service together through Zumbro?

During Lent, after Wednesday night worship services we want to provide everyone an opportunity to grow deeper and practice listening to God by having small group discussions around tables. We'll talk in groups of 8 or so about what you heard and experienced in worship that night, and about the theme for our five weeks together: *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*. Later in the year, we'll be exploring more ways that we can connect more deeply with God and with one another through small groups. This is an important step to take when we follow Jesus because faith is not a solo endeavor, it's a communal experience.

Transformation is not a linear journey or a process of constant progress. No one is going to get it right all the time. We can't experience Jesus' transformation unless we fall down once in a while and fail to listen like Peter did. Transformation happens when Jesus' gracious words and extended hand rests on us and renews us over and over again, "Get up...don't be afraid." The Greek word for 'get up' literally means "be raised". It echoes with resurrection...new life. It doesn't take long for us to forget God's call in our lives. It doesn't take long for fear and doubt to set in about whether we are good enough or faithful enough to follow Jesus. But God doesn't give up on us. He continues to work to bring out the very best in each of us. God shows us over and over again that being with Jesus really is a good place to be. Amen.