

Returning to Earth

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, March 03, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 9:28–43](#)

Sermon

This story of “Transfiguration” is a lesser known holiday of the church, though it takes place every year. This story is the fulcrum on which Jesus’s life story hinges. Before this, he wanders the areas of his home, teaching, preaching, healing... after this, he is launched on his way to Jerusalem, to the wrestling with what Jerusalem will mean for him, and for us. In other words, this story launches us into the wondering and work of discovering purpose in the season of Lent.

Jesus goes up to a mountain with three of his disciples to pray. All of a sudden, Moses and Elijah, characters from the Hebrew scriptures appear, and Jesus seems to be talking with them... talking about the journey to Jerusalem, and what the text calls his “departure,” literally, Jesus’s *exodus*... hinting at the fact that this destination he is going to will be a path of liberation and freedom.

I’ve always loved this story: the Matthew version of it was the text for the very first sermon I ever preached. All my heathen friends came and sat in the front rows... I don’t know exactly what I managed to say that day... but it led me to this day, so I’ll take it... it changed my life, in a way.

I colleague of mine who doesn’t love this story, or at least, hadn’t really thought too much of it, recently shared with me that she had discovered the shining joy of it. In this story, we hear again God’s “voice”, whatever we take that to mean, claiming Jesus: “This is my Son, my chosen.”

There, surrounded by Moses and Elijah, the representatives of both the law and the prophets, respectively, the disciples get the first explicit command to listen to Jesus from God. As my friend said, if the we heard God’s voice last in the *baptism* of Jesus, what we hear in this scene is close to Jesus’s *ordination*.

What that voice or command sounded like, I do not know. I do know that it was effective, to a certain point... but that it was also hard to follow.

You see, Jesus doesn’t speak after the command to listen! Which means that we can keep good company with the apostles when we say, “Just what are you trying to say, Jesus??”... As we struggle through church meetings or even our own personal prayers.

What Jesus says is the rest of the story that we hear today... what Jesus “says” is about going down the mountain, not setting shrines atop it. What Jesus “says” is about getting stopped by another father, another father claiming his son as beloved... and crying out for healing.

Peter wants God to “keep” Jesus (and them) on high. God wants to “give Jesus back” to the earth, so he can give a father back his son. God’s intimate connection and sending of God’s son leads to intimate connection and reunion of father and son below the mountaintop. The light above reminding us of the blinding light of love below, the unnamed father’s love that calls out for healing and hope for the boy.

The disciples go up onto the mountain, and they come up with a new high Christology... an understanding that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and they should worship him. Jesus wants to show them that he is the Son of God and they should imitate him. So, too, so many arguments snarl our common life in debates on what Jesus thinks, and very little about what Jesus would do... What God’s calling for him really means.

It just makes sense that we have Meredith from Beacon House here with us today. Because for ages now the recovery community has known about the relationship between “mountain-top moments” and the call to “return to earth.” It’s right there in step 12 of any 12 step program, “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” In other words, spiritual awakening is awakening *for* something... so go and share it, use it to bring others to wholeness and healing. Just like Jesus does for the child today, releasing him from what has harmed him and isolated him. Groups of friends and strangers in church basements have cast out an awful lot of demons, and maybe just understood them a little better in their days, I think because they are always unafraid to go down to find more friends.

Meanwhile, from on high: I was interested to see just how much news of the special convention of the United Methodist Church made the news this week. If you didn’t see it, this was a special meeting called of our most global American Protestant denomination... to try and find a way to live together as a church in the midst of profoundly different theologies and doctrinal beliefs about the ordination, marriage, and full acceptance of LGBTQ+ folk.

There was a lot of wrangling, of speeches. Ultimately, the body came down even more “traditional” than they had been before. Many people were hurt. LGBTQ+ folk and their allies as members and clergy were made to feel less welcome, less human, less whole. Some of us in other denominations made matters worse by trying to invite them over even in the midst of their grief.

From the outside, I would say the meeting was just as productive as many of the big, convention-center filling, “get your electronic voting device out” kind of church meetings on high have been. I have found that we can talk up a good storm of theological reflection, but somehow cannot string together a cohesive theological *action*. If we are supposed to be listening to Jesus’s life, I find that we are far more likely to talk over him with our own life’s interpretation of the Bible, or doctrine. There were precious few chances for the gathering lift up and pray over the experiences of LGBTQ+ folk, and what this might mean for them and for the mission and ministry of the Church. It was a talk “about” not talk “with.”

I should be clear: here in the United Church of Christ we have more work to do for justice in our own midst. There is still much in our common life that does not welcome all fully to our table, to leadership, and to fullness of life in the church. We are not somehow “past all this.” Also, many people do not clearly know the difference from one denomination to the other, so injustice in one branch of the church universal harms us all. Mostly the general public this week heard “the Church” fighting hard about who was going to be in... and out... in life, ministry, and theology all over again.

See, Jesus doesn't have a theology... Jesus *is* a theology. And this day, his theological assertion is that mountaintop moments are useless unless they call us more passionately to earth, to the intimacy and connection of human life which allows us to know unrivaled joys and pain, and offer one another comfort healing. Unless they return only sons to fathers. Unless they offer healing and community.

My prayer for this congregation—and for the church universal—is that we will have many moments where we revel in the glory of God and breathe in that experience deeply... and can rest in that glory for a while. Then I hope we will ask ourselves what that glory is for, and where it calls us to share it with the world. Mountaintop moments open us up to listen to God in our lives, but then we have to go down and show God in our lives. Just like Jesus... and if we want to listen to God, this story tells us we should listen to Jesus's life, and then go and share in it.

May it be so... Amen.