

The Last Sunday after the Epiphany
February 23, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Exodus 24:12-18
Psalm 99
2 Peter 1:16-21
Matthew 17:1-9

The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain ...

That's how our first reading opens up. It was a big deal. Moses went up Mt. Sinai. This is the trip that ended with God handing over two tablets of stone – the 10 Commandments!

But it took some time: 40 days and 40 nights, we're told; biblical shorthand for a long, long time. The next several chapters of Exodus tell us what God had to say to Moses during that time, all the specifications for the fabrication of a sanctuary, an ark to hold the tablets God is fashioning.

Meanwhile, the people down below grew impatient. And they prevailed upon Aaron to make for them a golden calf. And when Moses finally came down from the mountain, he became so angry he smashed the two tablets, and had to go back up again for a replacement set.

And when he returned the second time, he handed them the tablets. And they were amazed to see "that the skin of his face shone, because he had been talking with God" (Exodus 35:29).

Our gospel this morning calls all that to mind. Jesus goes up a mountain. It builds on this archetypal story of an encounter with God on high. Moses took with him Joshua as an assistant. Jesus took Peter and James and John ... and before all is said and done:

... he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

It must have been quite the moment – both for Moses and for Jesus. But what really intrigues me is wondering what it would have been like for Joshua and for Peter and James and John. Taking these stories at face value, they'd have been blown away.

I also worry a bit, by the way, about those NOT invited on those occasions, and how they might have felt. Be that as it may, for those selected for these journeys, the experience must have been life-changing and mind-blowing.

Just imagine. It isn't hard to do. When we imagine this morning's gospel, Peter's reaction, I think, makes perfect sense. It is a time-honored practice for people of faith to make pilgrimages to holy places. As a nation, we've built shrines to memorialize transcendent moments in our nation's history. And for many of us – and for many of our "spiritual but not religious" neighbors – mountain lakes and peaks are "thin places" where a person can encounter something sacred. So I get why Peter wants to hold on to the experience, why he offers to build dwellings that will cling to that place.

And, of course, that why we build cathedrals and churches – places set apart to celebrate and enhance the chances of an encounter with something holy.

So why does Jesus seem to downplay it all? Why does he command them, as they head back down the mountain, not to tell anyone about what they had seen?

I can think of a few reasons. In the first place, really big events need time. Peter says, “It is good for us to be here,” and he’s right, of course. But good to what end? What does it all mean?

And if the experience had been something devastating instead, the questions would still pertain. What sense are we to make of this? How are we to carry on after the death of a loved one?

Whether we experience a thing as exhilarating or devastating, we need time to process major events in our lives. In the meantime, there’s wisdom in not making bold, public pronouncements that pretend to make sense of it all.

And at least in this case, there’s something more; Jesus adds the critical detail. “Tell no one about the vision,” he says, “until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

It’s an ominous note, because his resurrection necessitates his death. They will not truly understand the point of the mountaintop until after they have experienced all that is to come, only after they follow Jesus down from this mountain and then back up another hill to witness his crucifixion.

Perhaps the vision was the only thing that kept them hanging on when all hell broke loose and the soldiers came and arrested. Maybe it was the only reason they stuck around long enough to still be hanging around for Easter Day. Jesus tells them to wait before speaking about glory on mountaintops until after they experience something sacred in the depths as well.

Or maybe Jesus tells them not to tell anyone about this vision because the experience itself was never the point. Peter wants to hang on to it as I’ve said. He wants to hold on to it – and I get that – but even as Peter is making the offer, the voice of God (no less) interrupts Peter – *while he was still speaking* – and says,

This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.

We heard these same words here a few weeks ago. They were the words announced at Jesus’ baptism, but with one critical addition here: the admonition to “*listen*”!

The disciples needed to be told to do so, of course, because they were chronically “hard of hearing” when it came to Jesus. It would be hard to hear anything in the midst of this amazing moment, of course. But it was hardly the only time they’d had a hard time listening.

The first words of this morning's gospel tell us that this all happened "six days later," referring us back to something that happened six days before.

That was the occasion when Peter had called Jesus the Messiah. So then Jesus told Peter – and all the others – that because Peter was right Jesus would suffer and be betrayed and finally nailed to a cross. Peter rather famously said, "God forbid," to which Jesus even more famously replied, "Get behind me, Satan!"

Peter – and safe to say, the others as well – couldn't comprehend the horrific turn of events, so Jesus told them all again. And still they tried very hard NOT to listen.

And you may recall that James and John, the other two up on that mountain that day, once pulled Jesus aside and asked to be given thrones, one at Jesus' left and one at his right, when Jesus would be seated on a throne in glory. Jesus told them thrones were never the point.

And it occurs to me, church is like that mountaintop experience. Maybe not on so grand a scale, of course. But the religious experience is not the point in and of itself; it's the call to listen not merely for what we *want* to hear. Jesus – along with all the prophets that came before – tell us what we *need* to hear, not merely what we *want* to hear.

"Listen to him."

But notice this as well: for all the challenging words Jesus had said before – and for all the hard and confusing words he would go on to say later – the very first words Jesus speaks here are gentle and encouraging: "*Get up and do not be afraid.*" And it's not just the words; it's the reassuring way Jesus reaches down to the disciples now cowering on the ground and touches them as he says to them, "*Get up and do not be afraid.*"

Oh, there will be much that challenges them in their journey forward, but in this moment there is only comfort. And "*Get up*" is actually a word of resurrection: "*Be raised!*" Jesus says, to face the daunting road that lies ahead for him and for them all.

And then, when they look up, they see "Jesus himself alone." Presumably, he looks the same as he was before. He's the same Jesus they walked up the mountain with, the man they'd tramped many a dusty mile with, whose mother and family they knew, the one they'd seen hungry and tired and footsore as the rest of them, the friend they'd shared meals and wine with.

For a moment, they had seen something more in him; they'd glimpsed his face afire with holiness. And now they see him as he truly is ... and always was. Holy, yes. And human, too.

And this familiar (and yet disconcertingly strange) Jesus invites them to join him as, together, they head back down from the mountain, to tramp more dusty miles together as they rejoin the rest of the human race down below.

And this, too, is like church. We come to seek something sacred, perhaps, and are admonished to do more than indulge a warmth in our hearts, but to listen for a word from God. And then we are sent forth, back out to rejoin the rest of the human race.

And then what?

Well, take a cue from the disciples, perhaps. They could never have looked at Jesus or the world around them quite the same again. Nor even themselves. They had seen a hint already that everything too easily taken to be ordinary was extraordinary and shot through with glory. They would come to discover that holiness pervades even the dark and the dismal calamities, as well.

That moment on the mountaintop wasn't just about a change in Jesus. It was most profoundly about a change in them, one that would send them down to do the work that would consume their rest of their lives, the holy work of seeking the sacred in every place and time that would follow, in search for the face of Jesus in every one they would meet thereafter.

I want to end this morning with a brief blessing by a wonderful artist and teacher Jan Richardson. For this Sunday of Transfiguration, she offers this blessing:

That when glory comes,
we will open our eyes
to see it.

That when glory shows up,
we will let ourselves
be overcome
not by fear
but by the love
it bears.

That when glory shines,
we will bring it
back with us
all the way,
all the way,
all the way down. ⁱ

ⁱ Jan Richardson @ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/02/23/transfiguration-sunday-when-glory/>.