

Feb. 11, 2018

Title: Coming down the mountain: Mark 9:2-9

Invitation to worship:

Welcome to worship today!

It is probably a bit of a surprise for you to see me standing in front of you, wearing this robe, welcoming you to worship! If you are visiting, or watching online or by television, you might be extra confused as to who I am!

My name is Kaylee Godfrey, and I am the pastoral intern here at First of Fifth. I'm a student in my second year at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, and I am fortunate to be learning and leaning into my call to ministry both at school and here in this church.

This internship has given me hands-on experience in all aspects of church life, with this opportunity to preach being one of them!

Having the chance to preach today is especially gratifying, because February is the Martha Stearns Marshall month of preaching. This is the tenth year that women have been specifically invited into the pulpit to celebrate this event through the Baptist Women in Ministry organization.

Our Pastors Emily and Amy were asked to be the guest Martha Stearns Marshall preachers at two other churches, with Emily at First Baptist Church of Athens, GA and Amy at Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington, NC.

This month was named after Martha Stearns Marshall, who was an 18th century Separate Baptist woman that was well known for being a powerful and eloquent speaker in North Carolina and the surrounding states.

This annual event allows us to celebrate the proclamation of women, and I am honored to have the opportunity to share with you today, in this special place and within this beloved community.

Let's worship together.

Opening prayer:

Would you pray with me?

Gracious and loving God,
 May the words of my mouth
 and the meditation of our hearts
 be pleasing to you, O LORD,
 our rock and redeemer.

Amen.

In the New Testament lectionary text for today that Meredith read, we see Jesus on a mountaintop. And this transfiguration account from Mark's gospel tells us the story of Jesus taking his trusted disciples up a mountain, and becoming transfigured before them.

Moses and Elijah are there and the voice of God fills the air around them. It's miraculous and awe-inspiring. And then what happens next? Everything returns to normal.

Jesus' clothes stop shimmering, the ancient prophets disappear, and the disciples are alone again with Jesus. And as quickly as they went up to the mountaintop, they come down.

It is a story full of incredibly important teachings, and is as confusing as it is wonderful. But what strikes me the most about this text is the end- that simple descent from the glorious back to the ordinary.

I spent my college years in the small mountain town of Boone, North Carolina. It seemed that one of every Appalachian State student's favorite things to do was to go hiking on different trails along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

I always begrudgingly went along, my short legs and history of asthma forever landing me at the back of the group..... slowly and carefully picking which slippery rock to step on next.

It was arduous and I always questioned why I agreed to, *yet again*, put myself through this.

Then....we would get to the top.

It always took away any breath I had left; the endless rolling mountains serving as a relentless reminder of God's inconceivable power and creativity.

We'd sit,
breathe deeply,

and try to find the Charlotte skyline if it was a particularly clear day.

But after a short while, after we had taken a few photos, we would head back to the trees and begin slowly choosing each step, descending back to the trailhead where we parked our car.

Each step seemed even more difficult than the last, because now gravity was working with those same slippery rocks and I always felt like I was one wrong move from tumbling down the rest of the way.

Finally we'd get to the trailhead, and at this point everyone was exhausted and hungry as we clambered our dirty shoes and sweaty bodies into the car, to begin the trek back to town.

I think about those college hiking trips when I think of Jesus, Peter, James, and John ascending to the mountaintop. After a long climb, they finally make it to the top. The view is surely spectacular on its own, but what happens there is even more so.

Jesus' clothes become dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. I can't imagine how they felt, just having hiked up a mountain, and then seeing Jesus become transfigured right before them.

I'm sure they were shocked and awestruck by the sight of Jesus, and even more so when Elijah and Moses appeared, two people that had long since left this earth. When the voice of God filled the air around them, every hair must have been standing up on their arms, and I'd be surprised if they were even still on their feet!

And as quickly as this moment began, so it ended. And there they were, standing in the silence.

When I think about how Peter, James, and John must've felt on that mountain, I think about the *wonder* I have felt on a mountain peak, and how that great beauty must pale in comparison to what the disciples witnessed on *their* mountain top.

And after such a holy moment, they come down the mountain. I imagine the disciple's skin still tingling...

...still trying to wrap their heads around what just happened as they carefully choose their footing from rock to slippery rock, making their way down the mountain side that surely wasn't a clear cut path.

But Jesus is *right there* with them, also descending from rock to rock, back into the city with them.

Jesus didn't stay on the mountain top, dazzling and surrounded by the ancient prophets and the booming voice of God. He returned with Peter, James, and John back to the ordinary messiness of life.

He came back down into the brokenness of the world to be an active part of the poverty, pain, and loss of the people he cared for.

And just as Jesus physically entered into the chaotic lives of those that surrounded him in this story, he does the same for us today.

Jesus doesn't only exist in the clean and put together parts of our lives, he is present in the hard parts and the murky parts of our daily act of living.

Every single day that we live is its own personal mountain. Maybe when we wake up and get ready for work it feels like we are climbing. Perhaps a raise, or a call from a friend, or a nap function as our mountaintop.

And then 5 o'clock traffic or a fight with a loved one feels like that treacherous descent down the mountain, only to do it all over again the next day.

But also I wonder, if every day is a mountain, then so too is our entire life.

Or rather, maybe our life is a mountain range that keeps getting wider as we live longer and longer.

We have good years and bad years, good relationships and disastrous ones, years of triumph and years that feel like complete failures. As we hike the mountain range of our lives, it helps to remember that Jesus is not only there at the peak, dazzling in white clothes to celebrate our victories.

But Jesus is there, carefully choosing steps down the side of the mountain while bad news piles on bad news and you feel like you can't take one more step, for fear of a landslide.

And when you finally get to the bottom, you know what I am talking about -**that bottom**- there too, is Jesus. Ready to fuel up and climb the next one.

This life-long hike, the constant ups and downs we go through daily and yearly are a part of the divine plan. Jesus is not telling us to stay on top of the mountain.

The peaks of life, those special moments when it feels like everything has finally fallen into place, surround us with a sense of comfort and rightness. Naturally, we would all seek to stay in that comfortable place as long as possible... But it never stays that way for long, right?

The thing is that Jesus is not telling us to stay comfortable on top of the mountain. We are called to take that mountain top experience and learn how to incorporate it into our lives.

When I begrudgingly went on those hikes with my college friends, I was always thankful that I did for those few moments of solace and beauty that were found at the top. Those views reminded me that it was all worth it.

And as I think back to those experiences of joy and contentment, I realize how important they were to my story. To recognizing God not only in the splendor of the summit, but also in the climb and the descent.

It isn't hard to find Jesus in the peaks of our lives, because we have so much to be thankful for. We have praises to sing and peace to feel, and *of course* we would see holiness in that.

Peter, James, and John were given firsthand glimpses of what that holiness looked like on their mountaintop, with Jesus *literally radiating* divine light.

But when Jesus is in plain clothes it might not be as easy for us to see or feel his presence with us. When things aren't great, when we are descending to the valley, Jesus isn't dazzling us with his holiness.

This post-transfiguration Jesus might not be as easy to spot, but that's when it is most important to find him. It's when the days feel dark and the losses feel significant that Jesus continues to stand by us and support us.

Jesus is present like a small candle in the dark, offering *just* enough light and warmth to make us aware of its presence.

Thomas Merton, a 20th century mystic and Trappist monk articulates this feeling of continual presence with Jesus in his prayer, which says:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact
That I think that I am following your will
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you
Does in fact please you.

And I hope that I have desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me through the right road
Though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, I will trust you always
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
And you will never leave me to face my peril alone.

With this prayer in mind and as we continue on this forward motion throughout our lives, **perhaps we** can begin to recognize where we are at on the hike.

Brothers and Sisters, does it feel like a climb- are we on our way to something brilliant?

Or are we on a descent, filling us with dread like a landslide?

If you're wondering- why does this matter? I know I'm not on the peak!

My answer is this: maybe recognizing where we are on the journey can give us a chance to change its outcome.

If life seems to be giving us more than we can bear- it feels like a descent that has no other way but down. But if we take the chance to realize that we are heading down the mountain, maybe we can use that realization to change our route.

Recognize where you are at, and where Jesus might be present in that situation. Maybe then a few other paths might appear that aren't so steep a downward slope. There might even be a chance that one of those paths leads back up!

It is through being aware of the journey, and finding Jesus where you don't usually see him, that may allow the mountain climb to seem a bit more bearable.

Leaving the glorious mountaintop for Peter, James, and John must've felt like losing something indescribable. But they didn't leave alone, they had the divine incarnate of God in Jesus with them as they descended into the chaotic world, and it was likely this presence that made the journey worth it.

Amen.

Benediction:

So now as we end this form of worship to begin again worship that is our very lives, let us remember that no matter where we find ourselves on the hike of life, Jesus is there, moving along with us. Go in peace. Amen.