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First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
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Transformation

Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

This is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany, where we learn and gain perspective on who Jesus was and is. The lectionary has been walking us through the series of teachings in the gospel of Matthew called the sermon on the mount. Jesus has been teaching, and healing, and performing miracles, and stirring up all sorts of trouble. Peter has just named Jesus as the Messiah, and Jesus predicts his own suffering, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Our text this morning finds him with his disciples on top of a mountain, looking, as we are, towards Jerusalem and the coming of Lent. Listen for a word from God.

(read the text – Matthew 17:1-9)

The international space station is a feat of global cooperation and scientific innovation. You must have seen the space station in the news recently, with the first ever all-female space walk – and one of those astronauts, Christina Koch, just returned after 328 days on the space station, completing the single longest space mission by a woman.¹ For the 20 years the space station has been in orbit, it has helped astronauts and scientists see beyond national allegiances and cultural differences, to support scientific research for the benefit of the whole human race.

There must be something about the view of the earth from 250 miles away in space that changes a person's priorities, offers a new perspective on the world and our place in it.

Mark Vande Hei is an Army communications officer who spent four months on the International Space Station in 2017-2018. Talking to a reporter from the station, looking through a huge window back down at earth, Vande Hei said, "the first impression that I got up here was that it, that, that, big layer of atmosphere is shockingly thin from up here." Time on the space station

¹ Pearlman, Robert Z, "Astronaut Christina Koch Breaks Record for Longest Space Mission by a Woman," 12/29/19 <https://www.space.com/nasa-astronaut-christina-koch-breaks-female-spaceflight-record.html>.

helped him ‘understand how close we all are to deep space. The people who live on Earth are all actually under a very skinny, protective wrapper. It's been described as less thick than the skin of an apple. All of us, just a few miles from the darkness...the layer of space we live in is’ “just incredibly thin.”²

A thin layer between us and the oblivion of space. Just a mile of air. Between us and the vacuum. I've never seen it that way before, have you?

Being high up changes one's perspective. Maybe that's why Jesus and Peter, James, and John went up the mountain in our passage today. Maybe they needed a break from the crowds, time and space apart. Maybe Jesus loved to hike – who knows. Whatever the reason for their hike, this is an incredible story. Mysterious transformation. Divine revelation. God's voice booming out of the sky, terrifying the disciples.

Before they can even catch their breath from the climb, they see Christ transfigured, shining bright as the sun, clothes dazzling white. Scripture says that's how it was with Moses, too, after forty days atop Mt Sinai, enveloped in a cloud of mystery, working out the details of the ten commandments with the one true God – he came down glowing. Had to wear a veil to shield his face after so much time in the presence of God.

So Jesus, too, is glowing, and then Moses is there, and Elijah too – the law and the prophets right there with him. And Peter's no fool, he offers to build a tent, to mark the space and the place as sacred. In those times, and sometimes still today, when you encountered God, you put up an altar to mark the spot, to tell others that this place, this place is sacred. This is holy ground.

Or maybe Peter just doesn't want the moment to end, I don't know. Maybe he wants to hold on to the miracle of his religious teachers all in one place, together. Maybe he doesn't like the prediction Jesus has just made about his death and would rather camp out on the mountain for a while, listen to Elijah prophesy, hear wilderness stories from Moses, let Jesus tell parables and keep everyone entertained.

² Mark Vande Hei, qtd. in “Dark Side of the Earth” *Radiolab* podcast by Jad Abumrod and Robert Krulwich, 4/26/18, <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/dark-side-earth>

But then the voice of God interrupts Peter's plans, booming out as it did when Jesus was baptized, again saying, "this is my son, whom I love – listen to him."

I'm so glad that in the midst of this mountaintop moment, with the dazzling clothes and the long-dead prophets, with the voice of God and the disciples cowering in fear on the ground, Jesus' next words are, "don't be afraid." He knows this is strange. So he reaches out to his friends and comforts them. Thanks be to God.

What are we to make of this scene on the mountaintop? Why does it happen? It must have been important, because it's included in all three synoptic gospels. Is God confirming Peter's assessment that Jesus is, indeed, the promised one? Is God giving Christ himself clarity about his calling before he heads into Jerusalem? What could it possibly mean for us?

I believe this story shows us that Christian life – our life – is always moving between the mountaintop and the valley. We are always moving between encounters with God and the hard work to which God calls us, between the broad perspective we get from being high up and the day-to-day work down in the weeds. Between the clarity of vision we have at 9000 feet, or 250 miles above earth in low orbit – and the haziness of memory that carries us through each day. Between the certainty of faith and the reality of doubt. It's a cycle – up, then down, again and again.

In some ways, and maybe for some of us more than others, weekly worship reflects this cycle – we come, seeking God's presence. Some weeks, in prayer and silence and scripture and song, we find it. Then, we step out the red doors, back to the street... hopefully fortified, refreshed, and ready for the week ahead, confident of who and whose we are, clear about that which God is calling us to do.

I wonder...when was the last time you went to the mountaintop?

I don't necessarily mean when did you last climb a mountain, although for some of you, I do. When was the last time you had a mountaintop experience? When was the last time you stood on holy ground? You know, when your eyes open wide, and you hold your breath... the hairs stand up on the back of your neck, you get goosebumps.

Maybe you feel the need to whisper or even take off your shoes... because surely you are in the presence of God.

Do you know what I'm talking about?

Was it here, in these old pews? Smelling candle smoke and furniture polish and must, light filtering through the windows, enveloped in the whispering memory of a thousand thousand prayers?

Was it in an auditorium or a concert hall, in the moment between when the last note ended and the applause began?

In a classroom, or a museum... on a city bus, or in the woods?

At a bedside, as breathing became labored and pain was thick in the room and the veil between this life and the next began to open?

For me, it was in Anderson Auditorium at the Women's Connection this past August. The singer songwriter Amy Grant was leading us, telling stories and singing songs in a wonderful concert that utterly surprised me. She told us about a difficult time she'd had recently, when she was so overwhelmed by self-doubt and the endless chatter of her own mind – the negativity, the inability to focus, the worry – that she felt paralyzed. The only thing she could do was to lie down on the floor of her hotel room. And then she said she devised a crazy ritual, which she invited us into:

She had the whole crowd, hundreds and hundreds of women, name the worries that keep them up at night. The inadequacies that they hold on to. The negative thoughts that constantly wear away at us.

And she said, "this is how we live! How do we hear this all the time? This chatter, this negative chatter!"

And then she had us fall to the floor – as best we could, you know, in the pews – and she said, but this is who we are: loved, loved, loved. And it was quiet. I could hear the people around me breathing, the rush of the creek outside.

And we did it again, and then again – cycling up, into the chatter and the pain and the anxiety we carry with us, and then down, to remember that we

are loved, loved, loved. Each time I stood I was surrounded by this cacophony of voices, women's voices, many older and wiser than I, naming the faults and the frailties, the shame and the stress, the worries and the doubt that each one of us carries. And then, together, reclaiming that deep down, despite all of it, we are loved, loved, loved.

Tears were streaming down my face by the end of it. What a thin layer, a thin veneer separates us from everyone else, when we all – each one of us – has this chatter to contend with. When deep down we are all loved, loved, loved.

The sacrament of baptism which we celebrated today affirms the truth of God's love for us. It is a mountaintop experience. A mysterious means of God's grace, when we name and claim the baptized as God's beloved child or children. Does baptism change us? Will Caleb and Quinn immediately become miracle babies, sleeping through the night, speaking in complete sentences by one and a half, potty trained by two – from my mouth to God's ear, you never know...

God's words on the mountaintop echo God's words at Jesus' baptism: "This is my son, whom I love, listen to him." And Jesus's next words are, "Do not be afraid."

A mountaintop experience changes our perspective. It reconnects us with what is true and gives us new energy with which to go about our work in the valley.

We can't stay on the mountain. Just like the disciples, we've got to go back down, back into the fray. Peter, James, and John were heading with Jesus towards Jerusalem, into conflict and condemnation, suffering and death, disappointment and grief. And we are heading out into a broken world with our own faults and frailties, our worries, shame, and doubt. But hear the voice of the one who made us, whose love is strong enough to sustain us through whatever may come – you are loved, loved, loved. Do not be afraid!