

Today is the end of the Epiphany season, and this coming Wednesday, we will mark the beginning of the most intense of the church's seasons, Lent.

You could say that Advent was the climb up the mountain, and Christmas was our celebration at the top of the mountain.

We've been camped up on the mountain, reveling in Jesus' awesomeness, his miracles, his parables, his prophecies.

Now, we are moving back down the mountain.

We spend the whole of Lent moving down the mountain, until Maundy Thursday and Good Friday when we are in the trenches, and then suddenly, miraculously, we're catapulted to the top of the tallest mountain on Easter Sunday.

It's quite an emotional roller coaster, but here we go, beginning our decent...

Now, you might be thinking to yourself, how is it that we're talking about moving down into the trenches when today's story is the epitome of a mountaintop experience?

It has everything from blinding light, to the apparitions of the long-gone prophets Elijah and Moses, to hearing God's disembodied voice bellowed down from the clouds.

Yes, it has all the trappings of a mountaintop experience.

But alas, I think this story begins our decent down the mountain because we're really getting glimpses of Jesus' vulnerability, his humanity and his mortality.

Now you might be thinking, umm, Jesus seems more divine and less human in this story with him turning a blinding shade of white, but stay with me...

Just before this story, in the Gospel of Luke, Peter acknowledges that Jesus is the Messiah.

*"[Jesus] said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'*

*Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'" (Luke 9: 20).*

And right after that, is the first time Jesus foretells of his impending crucifixion when he says,

*"The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'" (Luke 9:22).*

This story is often interpreted as one in which the disciples finally learn who Jesus is, and it's quite a transformative experience for them.

But I can't help but wonder if one of the most important aspects of this transfiguration story is that Jesus needs his disciples.

He needs them for support and encouragement, because as he has already acknowledged, he knows what lies ahead for him.

We hear a lot about the disciples letting Jesus down, they misunderstand him, they fall asleep, Peter even falls asleep in this story.

But then I think that Jesus must have needed those disciples up there with him while he was praying at the top of the mountain, otherwise, why did he take them along on the journey?

If he wanted to commune alone with God, it doesn't seem logical to bring 3 sometimes-oblivious followers with you.

And, this isn't one of those stories in which they tagged along against his wishes, or one of the times when they found him and he wanted to be alone, because that does happen.

But this story explicitly says that, "*Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray*" (Luke 9:28).

I invite you to think about a time in your life when you had to make a big decision.

Maybe it was what college to go to, or whether to marry a certain person, or whether to buy a house or take a certain job, or try some kind of treatment for an illness.

Throughout our lives we are faced with big decisions that will have big implications.

I know that when I've faced such forks in the road, I have to talk with loved ones about it.

I have to get the opinions of those I love and respect.

They help me work through all the options, and they support me in whatever decision I make.

They assure me that it's the right one, and that I need to trust my own judgment.

I think Jesus might have needed some support, some backing.

He asked them who they thought he was, perhaps to test them or to reassure himself that he was who God said he was.

Then, he tells them that he will undergo great suffering and will rise again on the third day, again, is this to inform his followers or at least in part for his own reassurance?

He knows what lies ahead of him, and it's not an easy path.

Maybe he wanted those disciples up on the mountain to pray with him so that they might offer him the comfort and inspiration that he needed.

They could be witnesses to God speaking to them.

When they come down from the mountain and when Jesus begins to question things, he now has those 3 faithful disciples who shared in the experience with him to remind him that yes, the road he walks is really hard, and yes, he's walking the right road, making the faithful decision.

Jesus is characterized as being courageous and devoted to God and to his calling, which he was.

But I am not sure if it's accurate to say that he was completely without doubt.

Later on in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is praying on a mountain again, this time the mount of Olives, he tells God,

*“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42).*

So, yes, he was willing to do God's will, but that's not saying that he wanted to or was eager to was not at all reluctant.

He was human, after all.

I can only imagine how reassuring it must be to have this shared experience with your closest friends, and God advocates for Jesus saying, *“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”* (Luke 9: 35).

This must have strengthened Jesus' resolve, because once they come down from the mountain, Jesus immediately heals a boy, by rebuking an unclean spirit from him.

It's like he's turned a corner, he knows what kind of power he has.

Therefore, he knows what responsibilities he has, he knows what he must do, and he accepts the mantle that he's being asked to take on.

He needed to go to the mountain to have his cup filled, and it was, filled to overflowing.

It sustained him so that he might be able to continue to do his ministry and practice his faith all the way to and through his death and resurrection.

A friend of mine compared this mountaintop experience and Jesus' need for reassurance as something akin to what we need and hopefully receive in worship on Sunday morning.

In fact, the very beginning of today's scripture says that Jesus went to the mountain to pray eight days after telling his followers that they need to take up their crosses and follow him.

So, if that happened on the previous Sabbath day, then this presumably, 8 days later, could have been the next Sabbath day.

But that interesting coincidence aside, this is a time away, it's a retreat.

They pray, they hear the word of God, and then they descend down the mountain, into the trenches, otherwise known as Monday, and Jesus continues his healing ministry.

I hope that Sunday morning is this retreat, a time to step away from the world so that we might move back into it with love and grace.

I hope that this is the place where we are gathered with friends to pray and hear the word of God.

I know that many of us find ourselves needing reassurance for all sorts of reasons, and, by the grace of God, if we are doing church right, we find that reassurance in this place through prayer, song, silence, and fellowship with one another.

We are here to remind each other that we are on the right path, that even though we aren't perfect and we second-guess ourselves, that we are enough, just as we are.

Jesus made himself vulnerable up there on that mountain.

Mysteriously, I think that the closer we come to God, the closer we draw to one another and to the suffering of the world, the more vulnerable we become.

Here in this place, we are invited to shed our pretenses, to be humble and vulnerable and authentic.

We too are called to be transformed through this mountaintop experience.

After all, this Sunday is called the transfiguration, which literally means to change shape or figure.

Sunday worship is supposed to change us, so that we leave slightly different than when we came in, hopefully a little bit more committed to compassion and justice for the world that God loves.

And hopefully a little bit more accepting of ourselves and the rest of humanity.

Peter was really comfortable up there on that mountain, so much so that he suggested building 3 dwellings for Moses, Jesus and Elijah so that they might stay up there.

Jesus didn't get a chance to respond, but God did.

God interrupted Peter and told him to listen to Jesus.

In so many words, God was basically saying, thank you for your suggestion but I have other plans for you.

You all can't stay up here.

You are needed at the bottom of the mountain, where the pain and suffering are.

We want to be comfortable, we too want to stay at the top of the mountain.

How wonderful it would be if everyone in the world was as kind as the people here, if we felt the sense of love and belonging and acceptance everywhere that we feel here.

Better yet, let's just stay here so that we don't have to face the sometimes-cruel world.

But we can't do that.

That wouldn't be answering God's call for us, it would be avoiding it.

We come here to be filled and restored and reminded that God is good, and that we are good, so that we might spread that love, patience and goodness out into the world when we leave this place.

The well-known scholar, Walter Brueggemann, wrote a prayer to God that was inspired by this passage, it's a bit antagonistic, but he writes,

*“So listen up: You, majestic sovereign... move off the page!*

*move off the page to the world,*

*move off the page to the trouble,*

*move out of your paged leisure to the turmoil of your creatures.*

*Move to the peace negotiations,*

*and cancer diagnoses,*

*and burning churches,*

*and lynched blacks,*

*and abused children.*

*Listen to the groans and moans, and see and hear and know and remember, and come down!*

*Have no Sabbath rest until your creatures rest well, all of us.*

*Be your Friday self that your world may be Eastered.*

*Move off the page!”* (Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann, pg. 65).

God must move off the page and into the trenches.

Jesus, Peter, James and John must move off the mountain and into Jerusalem and eventually to Calvary.

We too, must move away from Christmas, away from Epiphany, into Ash Wednesday, and into Lent, all the way to Maundy Thursday, through the hell of Good Friday, where we'll eventually come out on the other side on Easter morning.

We all walk this difficult path together, because we all need reassurance along the way.

Even Jesus needed it too.

So, friends, won't you join me on this Lenten journey?

Amen.

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