

Coming off the Mountain

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February 11, 2024

Will you pray with me?

Help us, mysterious and dazzling God, to follow Christ off the mountain, trusting in his footsteps of forgiveness, love, and sacrifice. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

I wonder what it would have been like to be Peter, James and John, high and apart on that mountain top, surrounded in swirling clouds on the day of transfiguration. What is it like to witness a deep truth that no one around you holds?

A few years ago, on a youth service trip, I was getting to know the college age hosts and they had all figured out I have a big sense of humor and joke around a lot. Somehow, we got onto a tangent about our biggest fears and our sight coordinator, Kristy, somewhat embarrassed, shared her deep fear of snakes. Well, later that day Kristy and I were in the backyard of a homeowner. She was standing next to me on top of hill by a culvert covered in thick deep grass. Only Kristy and I were present. As she is talking, I noticed some movement at her feet and when I looked down and to my utter amazement, she was standing on a snake! I couldn't believe it! It was a garter snake and it was desperately trying to get away from a pinched tail.

“Snake!” I said while pointing at her feet. Kristy slightly smirked and rolled her eyes.

“Snake” I said again, this time Kristy did not smile.

“You are standing on a snake Kristy”. Kristy, now pursing her lips said “I told you I was afraid of snakes and I don’t appreciate you making fun of my fear.” I was impressed with her quick firm response. All the while the snake is flopping all over the place and I can’t believe she doesn’t feel it hitting her shoes.

“Kristy, I’m not kidding you are standing on a snake, you need to step backwards so you don’t crush it.”

“Ok, now your joke is just disrespectful” she says and looking hurt she turns away and is starts talking to call some of my youth over. As she turns, her foot pivots and the snake is freed!

A few of my youth walk over and say “Hey Pastor Nick, where’s the snake?”

“It’s right there” and as I point to the snake it turns and in a split-second tumbles down the hill and disappears into the culvert. By now I am laughing and say:

“All I know is that there was a garter snake nobody saw it but me, it went into the culvert I hope its tail isn’t broken.”

And with that Kristy face flashes with anger, she picks up her phone, calls the regional manager, and requests a meeting between the two of us where later we talked about respectful dialogue.

Sometimes we find ourselves in private, privileged places to see things others cannot see. And inevitably this places us difficult and confusing situations. And when it comes to our faith, the uniquely personal revelations of Jesus Christ that God gives us, Like James and John and Peter, are opportunities to be faithful amidst the mysterious swirling clouds of our spiritual lives.

The story of the transfiguration is purposefully shared with us this day. It is the hinge point between the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany and the beginning of Lent, where the passion of Christ leads us to the cross at Easter. Just as the Gospel of Mark immediately starts with the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus in the river Jordan when John the Baptist to baptize him, Immediately the Holy Spirit descends again here, this time in the form of spoken word saying “This is my Son, the beloved, Listen to him”.

Just as Jesus Baptism is the inauguration of his ministry among God’s people, the Transfiguration serves as our inauguration of the Lenten journey by laying bare Jesus’s true identity, which is distinct and separate from the Judaic prophets of Elijah and Moses.

This blatant display was an absolute unmasking of Jesus as a prophet separate from Judaic religious narrative. This was deeply purposeful. For Jesus IS the Son of God, his authority is both an eternal cause for celebration and poses immediate threat to the established, historical, political, and religious order around us.

Further, one theologian says that:

Because the Transfiguration is our Lenten inauguration; “Rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection became integral to Jesus’s messianic mission, and that the way of the cross became equally integral and inescapable for all who would follow him.”

Mysteriously, never in the Gospel of Mark does God or Jesus explain *why* this inescapable path to the cross must be, nor necessarily what it means for us as disciples who seek to follow the path to the cross but are non-messiahs. While the **necessity** of the passion remains one of the great hidden mysteries of the Gospel, the passions **inevitability** became written in stone on that mountain top. With this absolutely unveiling, Jesus’s true place within the order of creation is cemented. Now we see the stark and absolute conflict that his value of faith, morality, and teachings would elicit in our world that struggles with greed, fear and domination.

God says “This is my Son, the Beloved” and in one dazzling, beautiful moment there was no turning back.

The weight and order of human institutions and the power of sinful desire defined the immediate future. The power of evil sought to destroy Jesus' devotion to non-violent loving justice and truth, a love that is fundamentally divine, which seeks an equality terrifying to many, and is offered with grace peeling over us like claps of thunder.

And we know that these evil, ultimately miniscule powers that in the moment seemed so pervasive and even dictatorially permanent - failed, for here we sit some 2000 years later in our house of worship. Here we sit, having inherited mysterious blessing upon blessing. Here we sit, engaged in such radical work of love like that of Esther, Partnership with our friends in the Kerio Valley, the work of our Economic Justice Committee, deepening lasting partnerships with Pillars and Leaven and Harbor House. Here we gather to hear Jesus's words spoken aloud, sing songs of love and faith in a world full of darkness. Here we sit, a thousand flowers ordered for Easter Morning, one for each worshipper to place upon wooden crosses and transform once barren symbols of tyranny and torture into vibrant gardens of dazzling color in a celebration of eternal life.

It will always be a mystery why this map to Golgotha, the hill of Jesus's crucifixion, would be drawn in the first place. Any person worth their salt should wonder: Why would God allow this, why would God's son walk such a path?

As followers of the Messiah, but as non-messiahs, it is equally important to remember that to follow Jesus Christ does not mean we walk to our own crucifixe. God does not long for or dictate suffering in service nor mandate

that we carry pain and injustice like Gods Son. I want to be crystal clear here: God does not sanction our suffering when we become fully identified as followers of Jesus Christ. But I will also be clear and say that when our identity is full on display, an identity that is personal and often contains a personal revelation and knowledge of Jesus which is absolutely unique and to us, spoken amidst the swirling events of our lives and upon mountain tops where no one else has wandered, we face the inevitable. For God's word is radical.

One theologian says this of the inevitability of the way of the cross:

The way of the cross is rather a vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the worlds power games of dominion, exploitation, greed, and deception In the confidence that Jesus's nonviolent way is truly the way of salvation, healing, and eternal life. – Rodney Hunter

Last week I spoke with a friend of mine who recently retired from social work. He shared a story of what it's like when you follow Jesus into the clouds and become witness to a heavy truth and develop a compassion that others do not always have. He recalled:

Our office got a phone call from a local school counselor who was frantic. There was a 16-year-old immigrant who arrived and was due any day. The school wasn't sure how to navigate the healthcare system for this girl and providers would not see her unless she had Badger Care. So, I expedited

the process and got her Badger care so she could get into a provider. Then three days later she had the baby.

When my interpreter and I went to the house to meet her after she had the baby, I was caught off-guard. I was expecting to see just her. Instead, I was confronted with a whole house full of people. It became clear I wasn't there just for the baby or the girl; I was there for the whole family. As I got to know them, the family shared their stories of the terror of fleeing Mexico. They shared about what it was like with drug cartels killing everyone in their town and burying bodies in their neighborhood. When bodies were buried their own backyard, they chose to flee. They came through Arizona and then here to Wisconsin.

So, this pregnant 16-year-old walked across the country fleeing a murderous drug cartel along with six other family members and little children. Like many refugees, they had nothing. Only the clothes on them. No food to eat. No money. No jobs. Extended family took them in.

When I went back to my office, I shared their story with other staff members. Staff began to bring in things for this family and girl and baby. We gathered extra coats and clothing, all kinds of canned food, toiletries, infant supplies, and we filled many boxes before referring them to other services in the community. But what struck me most deeply, was how appreciative they were, and how happy. After all the trauma they had been through on their journey, they were genuinely happy. Their prior circumstances were so terrible they were just thankful to be alive.

My friend reflected saying “ In my work, I go in and see this families like this that nobody else sees. You drive around these homes in Wisconsin and when you look a home you have no idea what is going on there. This is part of my calling as a person of faith, part of my calling is to walk into these houses. My job is like a ministry. I feel like a church member walking into their homes.

I actually cannot tell most of my stories- they are confidential. But I don't think I told anyone this story because this truth is not going to be received well by everyone. Undocumented immigrants, refugees, some people don't believe they should be in the US. Them being here represents a threat to the way we have ordered things. It's political and in my family it would set off a firestorm. But if you are not personal with this stuff, you can brush it off. But I cannot un-see them or un-feel my compassion for them.”

Friends, The way of the cross is a rather vigorous, assertive pursuit of social and personal righteousness through a love that refuses to play the world's power games of dominion, exploitation, greed, and deception. We do this in the confidence that Jesus nonviolent way is truly the way of salvation, healing, and eternal life.

For God says to us, in the swirling clouds with great joy and gratitude and happiness: This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him. Listen to him on the mountain. Walk with him in trust in your darkest valley. Call to him from the watery depths of the abyss you find yourselves. And know that inevitably he will be with you in the only love that is truly redemptive and truly saving.

So, In the meantime, we walk in profound mystery, together as a people, and personally, as Jesus Christ continues to reveal himself as the Messiah and show us dazzling compassion and swirling opportunities to be identified- as his own.

I wonder, when we come down, off the mountain will we embrace the Holy transformation that has taken place between us and our Savior?

Risk witnessing to the Truth even when no one else may understand.

Amen.