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The View from the Mountain

Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will set up three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Get up and do not be afraid.” And when they raised their eyes, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”

When I was in high school, I went with Lutheran Outdoor Ministries to hike a portion of the Appalachian Trail. I did—and do—a fair bit of hiking, but you have to remember that I’m from the flat part of the Hoosier state. Turkey Run State park, like many in the state, is mostly karsts, valleys, rock formations. When you hike, you descend from the flat part. So, when I hiked that tiny part of the AT, I was surprised at the what I saw. If God calls you up a mountain, you can be sure you’re going to get a great view. The disciples were treated to an amazing sight: their friend and teacher was changed before them, talking with past leaders of their faith, and a voice rumbled so loudly they cowered in fear. They were surely changed by this experience, and nothing would ever look the same to them again, because they have seen the world alive with hope.

The mountain of transfiguration is the middle of the gospel story. Mark was really good at getting it right smack-dab in the middle, eight chapters on either side—not the he wrote his account with chapters. Matthew is fine with settling for middle-ish. Anyhow, here’s the middle, and we know things are about to take a dark turn. The disciples have been with Jesus long enough that the shininess is wearing off. They are about to run headlong into their own limitations, in life as it is and will continue to be without stopping. They are about to be reminded just how tragic and sorrow-filled life is. They are also about to be disappointed that following Jesus doesn’t have immediate effect on the world as it is. Despots will continue their tyrannical rule—war, famine, pain, illness, disappointment will continue. And every single one on that mountain will follow the call of God until it kills them.

On this day of transfiguration, we may not be in the middle of our stories, but we don't have to be very far in to know that tragedy and sorrow lie before us. If we're paying attention, we stand to be disappointed by the world, frustrated and angry—by poverty and pain, tyranny and tragedy. And that our faith cannot prevent these things from happening. And while we do believe, with Martin Luther King, that the moral arc bends toward justice, we still find ourselves frustrated by the length of that arc and the slow pace of its curve.

Jesus's career began more or less on a mountain, with a blockbuster three-chapter sermon, and when he came down from the sermon's mount, the crowds followed him, wondering what he would do now. And, of course, Jesus's life ends on a hill outside Jerusalem, with onlookers so sure there was nothing he could do now. But soon, give or take 43 days, he'd be back on the mountain of his ascension, surrounded by his disciples, and assuring them that whatever came now, he would be with them, until the end.

There is a saying attributed to Lu Xin, a 20th century Chinese writer and satirist, which says, "Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence." Urban planners and landscape architects call these desire lines—when people take an alternative route than the one laid out. While, some of these desire paths are easily seen from the ground, they are unmistakable from the air.

It is a biblical trope, God calling folks up the mountain, giving them a spectacular show, and then sending them back down the mountain to figure out how to live now. Moses got a glimpse of God's glory—albeit the backside of it—in the crevice of a mountain; he received the Law on the mountain. Even while being violently pursued by Jezebel, Elijah encountered God on a mountaintop not in the wind or the earthquake, but the sheer silence, and God no sooner appeared before sending Elijah off down the mountain to "anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu son of Nimshi as king of Israel, and Elisha as prophet after him." Abraham, too, encountered God on the mountain, when God told him to take his son, his only son, his beloved son up the mountain to be sacrificed, but there, God provided, instead, the ram for the sacrifice. Each of these were granted a view—a view of God's hope for the world, changed.

Jesus regularly went up mountains, and it was always for the view. It was to see the world, alive with hope. For Moses, Elijah, and Abraham—and for the disciples,—here on the mountain, they're given a new way of seeing this sorrow-filled, frustration-filled, tragedy-filled life that will fuel them for whatever is to come. You see, when God calls you up the mountain, it is absolutely for the view. It is an opportunity to see the world as God sees it: alive with hope.

We've been called up this mountain. This day of transfiguration can mark a change for us, if we are willing to take in the view—to look at the world differently—if we can view the

world with hope and if we are willing to answer the call to be co-creators with God of the vision we have been granted. That is, I think, what we hear in today's reading from Leviticus. God is setting out a map, the lay of the land that, while it may lie fallow, it is still alive with hope.

If this place is ever a mountain, it is for this reason: that we can view the world honestly and be present in its pain. It is so we can be granted a vision that says this sorrow is not God's intent for us, a vision which says God is healing the world, holding on to it in its pain. If ever this place is a mountain, it is so we can be sent out to act with a vision of hope.

Amen.