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Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Just the Next Step

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."

Though Moses was raised by Pharaoh's daughter, he always knew he was a Hebrew. As a young man, he left the confines of the palace and wandered among his people. He saw the Hebrews were slaves, he saw the Egyptian overlords. He became so upset that, when he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. Soon, everyone, it seems, knew what he did, even Pharaoh, so Moses ran—ran away. He took up a whole new life in Midian; he married; he worked tending his father-in-law's flocks. And one day, out on the edge of the wilderness at the foot of a mountain—a mountain with many names, the Mountain of God, Mount Horeb, Mount Sinai—on that mountain, he saw a bush, alight with flames. And, there, God called him. God told him one thing. Just the next step: go to Egypt. Go back to Egypt, and there God will set the people—God's people, Moses's people—free. Moses would meet God again on this mountain, again for just the next step, to receive the Torah, the words that would guide the people, the words that would turn them again and again toward God and one another. Even though Moses was afraid—of his past, of the future for his people—God meets him on the mountain, meets his fear, and guides him in his next faithful step.

Generations later, the prophet Elijah fled to this same mountain. He spoken against the King and Queen, Ahab and Jezebel, for their idolatry and injustice. He'd challenged the prophets and priests of Ba'al to get Ba'al to light the fire for sacrifice. All day the priests and prophets prayed to Ba'al, and nothing ever happened. But when it was Elijah's turn, he had the altar flooded with water. Then, after a word of prayer, God lit the fire—burning the offering, the wood, the stones of the altar, even the water that had lapped at its base. Then Elijah killed all the prophets—it wasn't pretty. He fled, afraid and discouraged. God sent ravens to feed him—a reminder that sometimes we just need a nap and snack—and

then God sent Elijah on his way to Horeb—a journey of forty days and forty nights. He camped out on the mountain, enduring a violent wind, an earthquake, and a fire. But when there was a sound of sheer silence, God spoke to Elijah. God met Elijah in his fear and discouragement, in his uncertainty about the future. God met him there, and, again, God says, here is the next step—just the next step.

This morning, Jesus is on a mountain, and with him are Peter, James, and John. In the days leading up to this mountaintop experience, Jesus has been crushingly honest with the disciples—and with himself. He told the disciples about what is to come: how he will suffer and die. It was an awful truth, and he and Peter had a terrible fight about it. Jesus called him Satan—not so much a name, as a confession that Jesus, too, was afraid—for himself, for his friends—was tempted to not take another step on this particular path. Still, he told the disciples that following him means *you* have to pick up *your* cross.

What do you do next, after that? And with that elephant sitting on their chests, there's six days of silence, and then...

Then, they climb the mountain—Moses, Elijah, Jesus, Peter, James, and John—each in their own time, each weighed down by their own fear for the future. And on this mountain, they hear the voice of God. Maybe it's too sci-fi, but the more I read this story—and we read it every year—the more I think that this is a moment outside of time. This isn't that Moses and Elijah have joined Jesus in first century Palestine, but that Jesus meets Moses in the ancient Sinai wilderness, and Jesus meets Elijah fleeing the Southern Kingdom's evil monarchs, and Jesus brings Peter, James, and John, afraid for the future, and Jesus is there, preparing to carrying his own cross, for the sake of the world. This moment is the present moment *in their own time* for everyone gathered.

But there is one more party on the mountain. To make a nice, lovely party of seven. The Bible likes sevens. There is one more witness to Jesus's transfiguration. One more faith-filled person, unsure—afraid, even—of the future, straining to hear the voice of God, the call of God, hoping to be met by the faithfulness of God. One more witness: you. After all, you, too, know about the mountain, the cloud, the voice, this history, the timeline, the guest list.

So, past, present, future meet on this mountain to hear what is needed to speak truth to power, to hear what is needed to be faithful in the midst of trials, to live among God's people well, and to be encouraged even in the face of fear, even the cross. Past, present, future meet on this mountain to be called into the next step—just the next step. God meets us here, saying, "Here, here is my beloved Child. Listen to him."

Ok Jesus, you're on. And then Jesus, who is very God and truly human, says to us all—we who are afraid, we who are uncertain, we who desire to be faithful. Jesus says to us, "Here is the next step. Get up. Do not be afraid."

We can get awfully tied up in the big, long roadmap of our lives. We can get caught up trying to map out every single turn, but we have no way of knowing how everything is going to work out. We know that there will be harrowing moments on the way ahead, griefs and regrets. It can be paralyzing, trying to anticipate all of it. When God met Moses in the burning bush, there was just this next step: Go to Egypt. When God met Elijah on the mountain, it was make this guy king here, and this guy king over there, and tell Elisha he's in the prophetic on-deck circle. And for the disciples, Jesus cautions them against telling about this moment lest they become overwhelmed again about the enormity of journey before them. Just get up, and do not be afraid. All any of us can ever do is the next right thing, again and again and again.

The poet Laura Martin suggests: "Maybe the line is not so much 'do not fear,' / But do not stop at your fear." She says, "Let yourself remember / That the end of a hard road / Is a new place, / And you only go there / by moving."

Let me suggest one more thing about this story that matters. Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, John, Jesus, *and you* all have daunting futures ahead. But God has gathered us together. Peter is right when he says, "It is good for us to be here." Whatever comes next for each of them—for each of us—we have been gathered here, now. We each have our own road ahead, our own unique trials, our own particular crosses to bear, but God has shown us that we are not alone. This Sunday gathering is an awful lot like that Transfiguration mountain: we gather in our own time—our own timeline, among our own troubles and fears, but present at this table is the whole communion of saints, the faithful across time and place. Whatever is to come, whatever next right step we're call to do, we are not alone. Get up, Beloved, and do not be afraid. Amen.