

February 23, 2020
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Matthew 17:1-9 What Does the Lord Require? Walk humbly with your God
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 17:1-9 New Revised Standard Version

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 dazzling white. 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 make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice 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 looked up, 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."

For the last few weeks we have been looking at the verse that is printed on the front of your bulletin, Micah 6:8, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Make justice happen, love passionately as God loves, and remember that although we are not God, we are God's very own.¹

To walk with God means to be God's companion in the journey of life. Humility means knowing who you are and are not. You are not God. You are not in charge. You do not have all the answers. You probably don't know what's best for others. You cannot navigate life alone. You cannot make change by yourself. To walk humbly with God means allowing God to take the lead and allowing yourself to be a servant, dependent upon God and others for guidance, for strength, for community and forgiveness.

Jesus had power but he used it to empower others. He healed people but with no strings attached. He loved everyone, even people who were the least lovable. Walking humbly with God means listening to others and leaving space for them to influence and change us. When I am humble, I am able to acknowledge that there is a lot I don't know and that a lot of what I think I know may be wrong. Humility is the greatest resource I have because it reminds me that I am not the center of the universe. I need to remember that I am not God, but I am God's very own. We are not God, but we are God's very own.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday which is the last Sunday of Epiphany, the season in the church when we celebrate the light of Christ that was born on Christmas. Epiphany is when we remember the wise men who followed that bright light to find the Christ child. This is the Sunday before Ash Wednesday when the season of Lent begins. On either end of Lent, this Sunday and the Sunday before Easter, we hear a story of Jesus on a mountain. This Sunday we hear the story of Jesus that we want to hear. It is a story of Jesus in power, in glory, lit up like the strip in Vegas.² We are like Peter, we like this version of Jesus! This is who we think that God is and who God should be. We want God to be dazzling and flashy.

At the other end of Lent, the Sunday before Easter, we get a different story of Jesus on a mountain. It is darkness and death with the disciples running away, except for the women. Lent is a difficult journey. It is forty days when we are asked to be honest with ourselves. Honest in our commitment to the path that is before us and also our utter inability to walk that path on our own.

¹ <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5e3b23826615fba67d0000a1/wesley-allen-hey-whos-on-trial-here>

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1232

The Transfiguration story gives us strength for the journey of Lent. I had a family member who had an eye injury and it was going to ruin the plan for their life. There was a surgery that the doctors could do but it was risky. My family member wanted God to speak to them and reassure them that it was all going to be okay. I told them that God doesn't usually work like that. No one sees visions these days. We don't see Jesus glowing like the disciples did long ago. But, then I remembered one of my teachers, Dr. Sylvest.

When I was in preacher school at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, one of my teachers was Dr. Sylvest. He shared a story with us after returning from a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. In Medjugorje the Virgin Mary has appeared to six Herzegovian children since 1981. For several years the six visionaries reported seeing daily apparitions from the Virgin Mary and Medjugorje became crowded with pilgrims. Today three people still see visions of the Virgin Mary. Dr. Sylvest shared his experience of walking into a room where one of the visionaries was talking with Mary. Dr. Sylvest watched as the woman was apparently seeing the Virgin Mary, but Dr. Sylvest said it was like she was talking to someone who wasn't there. Then, Dr. Sylvest heard these words, "My beloved son, follow me and I will lead you home." As he said those words to us in class, his voice broke and tears came to his eyes, and to mine as well. It is so easy for us to turn Jesus into history or into a man with good ideas. Instead we have to lean on God for the strength required to live this life.

The transfiguration story begins with the words, "Six days later." Six days before, Jesus had asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter said, "You're the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One." Jesus tells the disciples that it's going to get bad and there will be a lot of suffering and pain. Peter can't believe it. Peter says, "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you." This can't be how the story goes. The anointed one doesn't die. That isn't what is supposed to happen. Jesus must have it wrong.

Six days later, they climb a mountain and have this vision of Jesus that was indescribable. Jesus was transfigured. Like Jesus' human skin slipped off and the God bones showed through. Why did it happen? It can't have been for Jesus, he knew who he was. It had to be for the disciples. For them to know Jesus as much as they could. For them to experience God in Jesus. And as soon as they could talk, they were trying to figure out how to stay there. How can we stay on the mountain top where there is only good and God and glory? And then a voice tells them to pay attention and they fall to the ground. They feel a gentle hand and they look up and see only Jesus.

I wish that I had been able to lean into the mystery with my family member that expected a vision from God. I wish I had told them that there is glory all around us, light and color and wonder and beauty. But, we have to trust. We have to lean into the real behind the reality we think we know.

There is a song called "White Man" by Michael Gungor. "God is not a man. God is not a white man. God is not a man sitting on a cloud. God can not be bought. God will not be boxed in. God will not be owned by religion. God is love. God loves everyone. God is not a man. God is not an old man. God does not belong to republicans. God is not a flag. Not even American. And God does not depend on a government. But God is good. God is good. God loves everyone. Atheists and charlatans, and communists and lesbians. And even old Pat Robertson. God loves us all. Catholic or Protestant. Terrorist or President. Everybody love. God is love."³ You might have thought that song was written last week, but it was released in the summer of 2008. The biggest controversy when it was released was that it included the word

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Wybvhr9KIU>

lesbian and it said that God loved lesbians. The writer said many of us don't like to think of God loving the people that we hate the most.⁴ Think right now of someone you really do not like. God loves that person. Hard to swallow, right?

The Bible teaches us that God is love and as Christians we are to be made into God's image, not to try to make God into ours. We don't get to control God. Imagine if the church was able to tear down the walls between "us" and "them" that has been with us for thousands of years. It has led to war, racism, poverty and there is enough separation and division in our world already.⁵

We are called to walk an intentional life with God that gives a witness that points to God. Today's story of the Transfiguration ends with Jesus telling the disciples, "Get up and do not be afraid." It is a pocket summary of the Christian life. Get up and don't be afraid. After an encounter with Jesus we still have an active part to play in the world. We have to get up and make justice happen, love passionately as God loves, and remember that although we are not God, we are God's very own. Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Get up and don't be afraid. God is with you, so get busy!

⁴ https://www.newreleasetoday.com/article.php?article_id=148

⁵ Much of this paragraph from https://www.newreleasetoday.com/article.php?article_id=148