

“Huddled on the Mountain Top”

Matthew 17:1-9

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The Transfiguration story takes us into the realm of the mystical. Matthew, our Gospel writer, invites us to picture three spiritual giants huddled together in the clouds. Moses, Elijah, and Jesus are together, sort of a reunion of spiritual leaders. It is an image of completeness. We associate Moses with the Law. We associate Elijah with the Prophets. We understand Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. Huddled together, they are a picture of completeness.

Often, when I am with people who are nearing the end of their lives, we talk about what it would mean for them to complete their lives. There is a certain satisfaction that comes with completing one's life. And that means different things to different people. In one of the Jesus infancy narratives, Mary and Joseph bring their baby to the temple for the rite of initiation. The priest, Simeon, sees the Christ child, recognizes who it is he is about to initiate, and says out loud, “Now let thy servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen thy salvation.” His life was complete.

When I think about completing my life, I think about finishing the Appalachian Trail; I think about reaching the summit of Mt. Mulanje. I think about playing tennis at Wimbledon in the over 80 age bracket. I think about reading all the poetry Robert Frost ever composed.

Jesus has loftier thoughts. Completing his life includes a sit-down with Moses to talk about the Ten Commandments and about the Law of Love and how they both share a vision of God's people free to be the women and men God created them to be.

We can almost hear Moses saying to Jesus, “I really like what you’ve done with the Ten Commandments, how you’ve simplified them down to loving God and loving neighbor. Well done! I wish I had thought of that myself!”

Completing his life includes a sit-down with Elijah, considered the greatest of the prophets. As they huddle, they talk about prophetic sermons they have preached. They celebrate their appreciation for one who dares to speak truth to power, for one who dares to call the community to a higher standard of righteousness. We can almost listen in on their conversation. Elijah is saying to Jesus, “I really like the way you have placed your trust in the truth, the way you have spoken a prophetic word in ways that bring people to new life, to hope.”

This huddle in the clouds has a feel of completion to it. However, it has quite a different meaning for Peter, James, and John. These disciples are still trying to discern who this Jesus really is. They have seen his birth certificate and they have heard his sermons and they have witnessed his healing ministry. Yet, they climbed the mountain with Jesus that day, not knowing for sure his identity as Messiah.

When Jesus invites them to climb the mountain, this is what he has in mind, erasing any lingering doubts in the minds of the disciples as to who he really is. If they haven’t put two and two together in the earthly realm, perhaps they can put two and two together in the realm of the mystical. Jesus will do whatever it takes to convince his disciples of his true identity.

As the disciples descend the mountain, Jesus tells them not to share this mystical experience until the time is right. But I can’t help but wonder about the conversation Peter, James, and John shared among themselves.

Now convinced that Jesus is the real deal, the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, they commit themselves in a new way to being his disciples. Jesus' teachings take on a greater relevance, a greater urgency. And these disciples begin to see themselves as leaders as this new Jesus Movement picks up steam. Leadership will be critical in the days and weeks and months and years ahead. Leadership! Yes, they are disciples, but leadership is what's needed now.

And leadership is what I want to emphasize this morning. Churches rely on lay leadership. We believe God blesses all of us with spiritual gifts. Some of us are blessed with gifts for leading our educational efforts, some for leading our mission efforts, some for leading our safe conduct efforts, some for leading our administrative initiatives, some for leading our worship life, and some for leading our faith formation. From where do these leaders come? These leaders arise from the pews. These leaders arise from mystical experiences and from very down to earth experiences. As I look around the country and read the literature, I see that the churches that are thriving are the churches where regular members are stepping up and saying, "Here am I, send me."

Here at South Church, I can imagine someone saying, "I learned about team-building at The Aetna, I could do the same here." I can imagine someone saying, "I built jet engines at Pratt and Whitney, I could engineer a fire drill here." I can imagine someone saying, "I taught in the public schools, I could teach church members how to teach the stories of the Bible." I can imagine someone saying, "I've been a farmer all my life, I could initiate a church garden and raise tomatoes for hungry neighbors." I can imagine someone saying, "I play the guitar, I could lead a string quartet for our worship life." I can imagine someone saying, "I make a really good lasagna, I could lead others in feeding our youth at Wednesday School."

I think you can see where I am headed. Peter, James, and John climbed DOWN that mountain with a different understanding from when they climbed UP that mountain! They see that Jesus' claim on them is real. They feel called to take his teachings to heart. They begin to imagine leadership roles they might take. I thank God all the time for Peter, James, and John. They were far from perfect human beings. But they arose to the need for leadership. And I thank God all the time for men and women and youth at South Church who follow in those footsteps, who say, "Yes, it's time for me to take the teachings of Jesus to heart. It's time for me to use the gifts and skills God has given me to build up the ministry and the mission of our church."

In my view, this is why South Church is such a happening place. When I see people of all ages lending their leadership, that's when I know we are living in the greatest pf hope. Amen.