

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 17:1-9

¹⁷ Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ² And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³ Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴ 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." ⁵ 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!" ⁶ When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷ But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." ⁸ And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

⁹ 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."

A trial lawyer was famous for his courtroom techniques and legal arguments. His opponents feared him; his clients loved him. He was always sure to win the case. He began writing in law journals concerning how these techniques could be acquired. He used a standardized lecture to be used for speaking engagements.

He traveled with his secretary, a bright young man who was proud to be associated with this renowned lawyer. After several months of listening to the same lecture, the bold secretary announced to the lawyer that he had heard the same speech so many times that he could give that speech himself. This so intrigued the lawyer that the switch was arranged.

It was agreed that the next time they were out of town, and no one would recognize them, they would exchange duties. The lawyer stood in the back of the room while the secretary addressed a room of expectant lawyers.

The secretary waxed eloquent, demonstrating techniques and addressing intricate details with precision. At the end of his speech the secretary was given a standing ovation. It was truly a splendid speech! The moderator indicated that there were still a few minutes left on the program and asked the appreciative audience if they had any questions for their honored guest.

One lawyer ventured to ask a question concerning the legal precedents for one of the techniques referred to early in the speech. The lawyer in the back of the room felt his heart sink. He could easily field the question, but there was no way to let his secretary know the answer. They were about to be exposed! The secretary began to laugh. With just a tinge of mockery he responded, "Why, that is such a simple and well-known precedent all of you should know the answer! Even the common layperson should know the answer to that question. In fact, to demonstrate my premise, I am going to let my secretary give you the answer."

The story of the transfiguration is one of those bible texts that may raise lots of questions for us. We may have heard it read to us many times and heard a variety of sermons preached on it; and we still wonder what we should learn from it. It's a story that seems magical and mysterious.

In one of the commentaries I read as part of my study, the writer opened by saying that there isn't just one point or meaning we can take from this story. There are many directions a pastor can go when preaching on the text. I think that is one of the marvelous factors about scripture—it speaks to many things we need to know to help us on our faith journey. We learn

many lessons from the same scripture, increasing its relevancy for all time. This point in and of itself is a lesson we take away from all of scripture. With this in mind, I want to share with you this morning the direction the Spirit took me as I prepared this sermon.

I'm drawn to think about mountain experiences whenever I read a bible story where God does something special at the top of a mountain. I think of the climb out of the valley, made to get to the top of the mountain and the view from the top of the mountain and the journey back down to the valley below. Hiking in the Great Rocky Mountains has been my greatest adventure of climbing to the top of a mountain.

I have taken many youth groups to National Youth Conference which is held every four years in Fort Collins on the campus of Colorado State University. A trip to go hiking at Rocky Mountain National Park has always been offered to the youth and advisors who attended the conferences. There were different skill levels offered and you signed up for the hike you felt comfortable taking. There was an easy hike that I believe took you on a walk around a lake. Then there were the medium and difficult skill leveled hikes. Then there also was the bus ride that one could take through the park.

I believe I may have taken the difficult hike with the first group I took to NYC, but I am quite certain that after that I took the medium skill leveled hike. Even the medium skill level hike was challenging. We hiked uphill for long periods of time, and the air grew thinner the higher we got, requiring times for breaks. The views from the top of the mountain were breathtaking. My first year there, we even had snow, and this was at the end of July. It was just amazing! The trip down presented challenges, too. The path was steep in places and it was work to hold oneself back from moving too quickly down the mountain and falling. Usually by the time we made it to the valley below, we were quite tired, yet exhilarated because of what we saw at the top of the mountain.

The transfiguration story begins in the valley below and takes Jesus along with three disciples to a mountaintop. The imagery of valleys and mountaintops is prevalent in scripture. The valleys often refer to times when our life journeys are average or when times are difficult. The mountaintop refers to positive, emotionally charged, euphoric, and renewing moments of our lives. Unfortunately, mountaintop times do not continue for an extensive amount of time.

Everyone has many mountaintop and valley experiences. And, if there's one thing I've learned from my life journey, it is that **walking** through the valleys—the low, dark, challenging, painful experiences and feelings of life—is necessary in order to get to the next mountaintop, the healing, peaceful, joy-filled, and renewing moments of life.

The twenty-third Psalm makes this point when it says, "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me," Many of us hear the words, "thou art with me," which is comforting, but what about the walking part of that verse? Are we tuned into hearing those words too? It doesn't say "while we sit or while we do nothing", it says "as we walk," indicating there is movement in our souls and minds, and depending on the situation, there may be movement in our physical existence.

Through today's text, in what is noted as the transfiguration of Jesus, we find ourselves taken to a mountaintop again—this time, along with Jesus and three of his disciples. What happened there was amazing, even life changing. But before we focus too much on what happened on the mountaintop, let's take a look at what happened in the valley below, just prior to this experience—particularly as it relates to the disciple Peter.

The scripture tells us that the transfiguration occurred six days after Peter's dramatic personal confession that Jesus is the "Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus responded to

Peter's confession, telling him that he will inherit "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." That had to be a high moment for Peter, knowing the great Teacher and Messiah was pleased with him.

However, shortly afterwards, Jesus began telling his disciples about how he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and die. Upon hearing this, Peter began having some apprehension about Jesus' identity and ministry. Peter took Jesus aside and scolded him and told him that this will never happen. Jesus then turned to Peter and said to him, "Get behind me Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." That had to hurt!

One moment Peter was high on a mountaintop because Jesus told him that he would inherit the keys to the kingdom of heaven; and the next moment, Peter must have felt like he was in a dark valley because Jesus called him Satan. Peter's quick-turn experience is not unusual. It's amazing how quickly things can change for us too. One moment life is good, and we feel on top of the world; then something comes along and turns our world upside-down, leaving us feeling lost and alone— not knowing which way to turn.

Going back to Peter's story, this could have been the end of Peter's journey with Jesus. I mean, think about it. Jesus had just called him Satan. How would you feel? There are many others who chose not to follow Jesus for much less than this. We don't know what was said or what happened to Peter during those six days before the transfiguration. What we do know is that Jesus took Peter along with himself, James, and his brother John to the mountaintop. Obviously, Jesus did not abandon Peter; instead, Jesus walked with Peter through the valley and took him to the mountaintop again. The experience at the top of the mountain was extraordinary for all of them. There on the mountaintop, Jesus was "transfigured before them." His appearance changed. He became even more beautiful, mystical and brilliant. His face glowed as did his clothes. Jesus radiated light.

That likely would have been enough to stun the disciples and perhaps even Jesus, but then Moses and Elijah, two heroes of the faith, also strolled into the scene and started a friendly chat with Jesus. And as if that was not enough to make the journey up the mountain worthwhile, God's voice broke through affirming Jesus once again as his Beloved and Jesus' call. What an incredible scene it was on that mountaintop! How could the disciples not be changed after experiencing this!

Even the two disciples, who were not carrying within themselves the same painful burden that Peter was carrying as he climbed the mountain with his friends, had to be changed by this mountaintop experience! That's right, let's not forget about the other two disciples. From what little we know from the text, their journey to the mountaintop was different. Perhaps, they struggled with their own insecurities and failures. We don't know, but there were certainly reasons for them to be there on the mountaintop, too.

Like the three disciples, we all have reasons and needs for climbing the mountains. The life paths we walk are different for each of us. Our life experiences are different, but we all are influenced by our particular experiences. At the same time, we also may be a part of a similar life experience, yet we process the experience differently, and so it may have a different impact on us.

Our individual valley journeys may be different—some very traumatic, others more ordinary or habitual; but still, a faith community, dedicated to following Jesus will travel together. We walk together through the valleys where it may be dark and treacherous or less than spectacular and uneventful, but we also have the opportunity to climb together to the mountaintops where the glory of God will richly bless us.

Each of us who worships here at Hagerstown Church of the Brethren has had our valley experiences. Some of us may feel as though we are in the valley right now. Each of us bring those experiences with us to the life we have together. And like Peter, James and John, each with their own loads to bear, we walk together with Jesus to get to the mountaintop.

We walk with one another up the mountain together to help each other to heal and be renewed. We know when we have reached the mountaintop because that's where we find Jesus, living in and through us, shining brighter than any light, granting one another peace, hope and unconditional love to help support and heal pain and wounds that darken our valleys. In the glory of these moments, there is a holiness that changes us, each one and together.

If you think about what it must have been like for the disciples and Peter on that mountaintop—seeing the glowing glory of Jesus affirming his divinity and seeing Moses and Elijah who connected the pieces of prophecy for a promised Messiah to come and save God's people—it had to be life changing, even energizing their faithfulness to God and their commitment to being disciples of Christ.

Peter, probably carrying the heaviest of burdens to the top of that mountain, didn't want the moment to end. But Jesus essentially told him that they needed to move on. And, although they all walked away from that experience, I can't help but think that Peter must have felt renewed hope for himself. Sure, it wasn't the last time he messed up; but from that moment on he understood that Jesus would never abandon him; but instead, Jesus would bring Peter back to him.

If there's nothing else that we learn from our trips to the mountaintop with Jesus, it is that we, too, will never be abandoned when we find ourselves, personally or corporately, in the valley, feeling lost and troubled. Jesus is there with us making what is sometimes the arduous journey to the mountaintop again. The sky is the limit in where we will go from there as we follow Jesus. May we always be looking up, focusing on Jesus as we climb our way out of the valleys onto one Godly mountaintop after another. I assure you, as the scripture does, that the view there will be spectacular, and life changing. Amen.