

April 19: 2020 / Luke 9:28-43a / “Skiing Jumping with Jesus”

“And they were all amazed and astounded at the greatness of God.” Good morning friends near and far. May God be with us this day.

On this first Sunday after the resurrection of Jesus, this Bright Sunday we are thinking about moments when Jesus has shined brightest for us, has brought us from darkness into light.

When we are younger we often think about our camp experiences as high points...places where we encounter and meet Jesus in a new and wonderful way. I share those with some of you as well. Two experiences stand out for me. The first was when I was in ninth grade. Camp Menno Haven in Central Illinois had, as part of their camp experience, something called “The Boundary Waters” in which they took, in my case on this trip, 8 ninth grade boys on a two week self-contained canoe trip through the boundary waters. I distinctly remember encountering God in the seclusion of the wilderness and the stillness of the waters and the call of the lutes in the morning. Bright and Beautiful. A mountain top experience for a central Illinois youth accustomed to only flat farm country. I saw God in a different way than I had before.

And then, a few years later, at the age of 25 when Leroy Mast who was the executive director at Camp Amigo invited me to be the summer pastor for all the campers and staff that summer. Another mountain top experience that brought an encounter with God, creation and people to the forefront of my life and contributed to who I am today.

Both of these mountaintop experiences moved me forward as a person / and pushed me spiritually in ways that contributed to my understanding of the greatness of God.

Today we have another story of a mountain top experience, one of several that we find in the Bible. But today’s story has a twist. Instead of the burning bush for Moses on Mt. Horeb that helps him to encounter God, in this story on this mountain top the disciples see Jesus in new way...literally radiating. But something else is going on for them that contributes to this mountain top experience that we don’t quite see and hear with our non-Jewish 21st century ears and eyes.

The number 3 is important, as in three humans witnessing what was taking place. The Jewish folks of that time would have picked up on the requirement from Deut. 19 that there needed to be three witnesses in order to testify to any fact as being true. But wait, it wasn’t just 3 human witnesses. There were also 3 divine witnesses, Moses, Elijah and the voice of God.

So the Jewish folks of Jesus day would have heard this and thought, “this is incredible. It’s true in both earth and heaven, that this person who came to earth in the form of man was the greatest gift ever given by God. This person was a visible sign, in the presence of reliable witnesses of the reality of the power and glory of God.”

But there is more for they would also have picked up on something we might miss. The appearance of both Moses and Elijah would have triggered an immediate response of hope welling up in them; for 2 reasons.

First, it would have reminded them of the many times that God appeared to ordinary people like you and I. God cared enough to be close to us. God cared enough to be close enough to talk to us. And there is something very comforting about that.

And second, both Moses and Elijah are part of Israel's eschatological hope...how things are going to end. In Deut. 18, halfway through all the decrees and commands and laws Moses starts talking about the future. God is allowing him to see into the future and he, Moses speaks of God's promise of raising up someone from in their midst and how God will put God's words in his mouth and he will tell them everything God wants us to know. He will, very literally be speaking from God's heart.

And likewise, in the closing verses of what is our Old Testament, the book of Malachi speaks of Elijah being sent by God again before the day of the Lord comes. And boom, here it is! And so for early Christians of Jewish descent, hearing this story of transfiguration, they would immediately think that, "without doubt, this Jesus stands at the end of time...the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams." And because of that they could go on trusting that God will be working for good in their lives, no matter how difficult the times may be that they we are living in. It gave them hope / it gave them the ability to trust as they moved forward.

And so it is little wonder that the disciples wanted to stay up there on the mountain.. Kind of the same way I didn't want leave the boundary waters that summer; nor camp amigo back in the day. I didn't want it to end. They're not called mountain top experiences for nothing.

But here is where this story intersects with our lives.

This story of the Transfiguration comes strategically at the time of Jesus' greatest popularity yet also when the first notes of suffering are beginning to sound. The disciples don't like that. And as the ninth chapter of Luke continues on and the rest of the Gospel of Luke unfolds you can see the disciples are scared. Things are starting to feel out of control.

I don't know about you but my brain works in some weird ways as I'm interacting with stories. So for example, this story brings to mind the image of ski jumping. You know what I'm talking about. People are at the top of the mountain, the top of the ski jump. They strap on some skis and head down hill and then hit a bump and take off into the air. If you are talking the Olympics when they hit the lift and take off through the air they fly something like 800' before they land. You couldn't pay me enough to do that. Because once you head down the hill there is no stopping, no turning back. And once you are in the air, things are out of your control.

No wonder as the disciples hear Jesus talk about suffering they are growing uneasy. "You want us to follow you? You want us to strap on some skies, head down the hill, and fly through the air into a landing that is obviously going to be painful?"

I'm speculating here but no wonder they wanted to build something permanent up there. Peter wants to hang onto the moment, to capture Jesus as transfigured. But the mission, the reason that Jesus came was down in the valley, not on the mountain. It wasn't at the top of the ski jump, it was at the bottom.

And I understand Peter, because it is so counterintuitive. The light shining on the mountain, isn't that where it is supposed to be? Up there for all see, drawing everyone to it? Right? It seems counterintuitive but, No. Because just like ski jumping the glory isn't up on top of the ski jump. It is down at the bottom. You don't end up with a gold medal at the top of the mountain. You end up with it down at the bottom.

The glory of the Lord, the greatness of God is not up on the mountain, it is down there on the cross, in the empty tomb; it is in the healing of the boy not well in this story.

I think for many of us right now, it feels like we are flying through the air...with so little under our control. We are flying through the air as friends and family contract COVID 19 and we are fearful for them. For those working in health settings, all masked up, worried about picking something up, being so careful not to bring any virus' home...flying through the air. For those who have lost jobs, it is really scary as you fly through the air. For those of us who are older or with compromised immune systems, knowing that this virus could quickly claim our lives, flying through the air can feel quite unsettling.

It is almost like we got pushed down the mountain. It wasn't our choice. And now we are flying through the air with no real way to control what is going on. We know we will land at some point but we don't know what that will look like, how painful it is going to be for ourselves or those whom we love. Life is going to be different. And like the disciples, we can be confused and scared. Can't we just go back to what it was before? What we were familiar with. What we thought we could control?

This story intersects with our lives in the same way it does with the disciples. Because the question is the same. "How do I make it through the fog of my fear and anxiety when things are scary and out of my control? And I remember in this story, the fog, the cloud that came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. And then from inside the cloud came a voice, and this is important, the voice came from inside the fog, not outside, and it said, "This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!" Listen to him.

I wonder what God is speaking to us from the clouds that we might find ourselves in right now. We all may be sharing in a sense of loss and unease and fear right now...but I suspect that our clouds are a bit different from one another. But what isn't different is that God in Christ is in the midst of these clouds speaking to us. And I wonder what you are hearing in this time?

I would suspect that it is simply quite profound though you may not think it is that profound. Or maybe let me say it this way. I hear God speaking in profoundly simple ways right now. I have heard two different individuals, from two different circles of friends whom I'm sure don't know each other say the same thing. "Making masks is my act of worship right now." That is the Spirit of God speaking, through something as simple as making a mask.

I have heard, as I've talked to older folks in our congregation, their gratitude for those of you who have reached out to them with phone calls of encouragement; food that you have brought to them so they don't have to go out. Your caring is the Spirit of God speaking. Profoundly simple acts that say so much right now.

I heard the story from someone who answered their doorbell to find no one at the door but a package of toilet paper on their doorstep. Apparently a young man from the neighborhood wanted to do something for his neighbors in this moment so he brought people toilet paper.

I laughed when I heard this and said when I was that age I was delivering toilet paper too but in a different fashion and trees were involved. Not one of my brighter moments. But I heard God speaking in that story of someone leaving toilet paper on a doorstep....profoundly simple.

I don't know what your clouds are like right now, this fog of fear; I don't know what your landing is going to be like; I don't know what my landing will be like when it is all said and done. I am aware that in this moment I'm not moving as gracefully as I would like.

But I do know this. That God has chosen to be close to us in this time and is speaking in profoundly simple ways. And what I hear, whether it is lilies on a calm morning lake or toilet paper on a doorstep is encouraging me to trust. To trust that no matter how difficult the times may be that we are living in, God in Christ shines brightest in these unfolding moments of life. That God's healing touch can be and will be upon our lives. And this gives me hope. It gives me the ability to trust as each new day presents itself, no matter what is in that day. I pray that it may be for you as well.

Invitation to Pass God's Peace to one another.

Prayer