

“FOLLOWERS OF JESUS”

Matthew 16:21-26; 17:1-9

February 23, 2020

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Read Matthew 16:21-26

As we hear the story we call “the Transfiguration,” I wanted us to hear those verses from Matthew 16, because they are essential context for what comes next. In all three of the gospels that tell the Transfiguration story, Jesus’ words about following and taking up the cross come right before Jesus leads Peter, James, and John up the mountain. The experience they will have there is something we can’t really explain – some people think we probably shouldn’t try to – but you know, in the Bible, some strange things happen on mountains. Mountains are sacred places, places of encounter with God. We are invited to witness this particular mountain-top experience:

Read Matthew 17:1-9

A few weeks ago, as the season after Epiphany began, we heard the story of Jesus’ baptism, and we remembered and renewed our own baptismal promises. In that story, we saw that baptism – Jesus’ baptism, and ours as well – is about two things: identity and purpose. Also in that story, you will remember, a voice from heaven spoke a blessing upon Jesus: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” And now, just before we move into the season of Lent, we read this story, and we hear, again, a voice – the voice of God – speak from a cloud: “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him.”

Those two blessings kind of “bookend” this season. During the weeks in between, we have reflected on our own identity and purpose as those who are baptized into Christ. We have been reminded that we are God’s own, “chosen, holy, and beloved” – fundamental self-understandings that shape the way we live. We’ve discussed together all that it means to be “the body of Christ” together and in the world. We have remembered that we are not self-made but what *God* has made us, and that we are made for good works – for compassion and not for judgement. We have reflected on what a challenge it is to be both thoughtful students *and doers* of the word, Christians who take what we have learned seriously enough to act on it.

Today, along with Jesus’ disciples, we hear Jesus’ say “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” It’s not accidental that this is coupled with the Transfiguration story in Mark’s and Luke’s gospels, as well as here in Matthew. And it’s worth noting that in all three of these gospels, this is a turning point in the narrative. From here, Jesus moves toward Jerusalem and the cross. From here, the stakes get higher. From here, the conflict between Jesus’ way and the interests of the powers that be becomes ever clearer. From here, the disciples will have to wrestle more and more with the cost of following Jesus.

I don't really understand why Jesus went up that mountain, what the purpose was of that conversation with those two great leaders from Israel's history – the lawgiver Moses and the prophet Elijah, or why he brought James, John, and Peter along to witness it.

But it seems clear to me that it is a watershed moment, and that it is related to the challenge to take up the cross and follow. What I'm not sure of is whether it was for those three men a moment of assurance and strength or a moment of challenge. Having decided to follow Jesus, was this an opportunity to understand more fully the significance of that choice, to have the rightness of their path confirmed? Or is it more in the nature of a warning: "don't make this choice lightly; this is bigger than you imagine"? Maybe it's both. We see in their reactions both fear and an eager awareness that they are experiencing the gift of a holy encounter.

For me, the story coalesces around the challenge of following Jesus. What they witness on the mountain brings home to Peter, James, and John – in a way they did not grasp before - just *who* it is they are following.

Preacher Joseph Harvard puts it this way: "The disciples had their eyes opened, and they saw a new reality. It was revealed to them that the way of Jesus was God's way in the world. The one whom they had been following had the power to transform them into agents of God's love and justice, and to heal a broken world. Wow!"

Wow, indeed. But... it's no wonder there was some fear, too.

This is a whole lot more than following a kind and charismatic teacher around the countryside, hearing his stories and observing his healing way with people. This is something way beyond following somebody on Twitter or Facebook, or following the news about your favorite sports team (or celebrity, or politician, depending on your entertainment of preference!). This is about your whole life. This is about who you are going to be and what you're going do. (There are those questions of identity and purpose again!)

What happened in the sacred space of that mountain – little though we understand it – was a holy, transcendent, revelatory experience, but it could not be more clear that it was not meant as the be-all and end-all for John, James, and Peter. The context - the question hovering over the whole experience - is this issue of following. Not only that they followed Jesus up onto that mountain, but that – whether – they will follow him down, back into the ordinary reality where glimpses of glory are few and far between and where faithfulness is tested daily.

We know this same challenge. We don't always know what to make of those experiences, but when we follow Jesus into a place or time where we meet God, we feel uplifted, reassured, blessed, maybe even stronger. But then we follow him back "down the mountain" into the messy ordinariness of life where we have to help each other, take care of the weak and the hurting, do thankless but necessary tasks with grace, resist evil, choose the good even when it's hard or makes other people mad, make sacrifices, and give up our illusions of control. That's hard. Sometimes maybe we remember or can even still see the glow of the glory we witnessed; other days, not so much.

Following Jesus is hard. Understanding ourselves as “followers of Jesus” first and foremost is entirely counter-cultural, in that it means no other identity defines us more than this one: not our nationality, our church affiliation, our politics, our race or ethnicity, our generation... not class or sexuality, the family we come from, the work we do, any groups we belong to, or experiences that have shaped us. Those things are all important, and they help to define for each of us what following Jesus means in our circumstances. But none of them is to be *equated* with following Jesus. This radical sense of ourselves as Jesus’ followers is hard to embrace, and if we do so, we do it only imperfectly.

Being followers of Jesus is hard, and even a transformative experience of God’s presence and a firm conviction that this is our path doesn’t make us exemplary disciples just like that. (It didn’t work like that for Peter, John, and James, either!) But I do think the Transfiguration story has a clue for us about where to begin. I mentioned earlier the similarity between the words spoken by God at Jesus’ baptism and the words spoken on the mountain. But did you notice what’s different? On the mountain, with the call to follow Jesus hanging in the air, the voice of God says, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased,” then adds: “Listen to him.”

Listening is not following, as Jerry said last week. But listening is the beginning, if it’s really *listening* and not merely letting familiar words go in one ear and out the other. Listening, it seems to me is deeper than hearing the words, deeper than being able to recite them back, deeper than grasping their definitions and sense, deeper even than understanding the meaning and intention. Listening is attending to the spirit within and under the words, the heart of them. Listening is openness to receive truths and new insight. Listening is the patience to, well, *listen* before preparing a counter-argument or an alternative reading, before raising our questions. Listening is trusting that both the speaker and the words have something for us. Listening is absorbing the word, letting it become part of us. Listening is readiness to be changed, led, redirected, sent... to obey.

What if we spent more time listening to Jesus? I mean really listening.
Think about some of the things Jesus said:

Blessed are the merciful.
Love your enemies.
You can’t serve both God and money.
Seek and you will find.
Don’t worry about your life.
Strive first for the kingdom of God
Do to others as you would have them do to you.
Whoever welcomes a little child in my name welcomes me.
Do you want to be healed?
I have called you friends.
Get up; don’t be afraid.
Take up your cross.
Follow me.

What if we kept these or other words of Jesus close at hand, constantly percolating in our minds, regularly the focus of our meditations? What if we believed those words were meant to shape and guide and transform us? What if we were open to that transformation? I feel like our lives would be different; the church's witness would be more different – more radically courageous and grace-filled, perhaps; the actions we would take and the realities we would accept and the things we would strive for in our world would be different.

Jesus says, "Follow me." He also says, "do not be afraid." God says, "Listen to him." Listen.

Amen.

Resources:

Joseph S. Harvard, III, "Matthew 17:1-13, Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, volume 2*, 2013.