

Coming Down from the Mountain

*A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Paul J. Carling
at St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk, CT*

TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY: FEBRUARY 19, 2023

EXODUS 24:12-18 | 2 PETER 1:16-21 | MATTHEW 17:1-9

Lord, open our ears to hear your word, and open our hearts to live your word. Amen.

You just never know what happens, do you, when we pay God a visit. Sometimes it's quiet as a whisper, like when Jesus goes off to pray; and sometimes, like today, pure pandemonium breaks loose.ⁱ

The Transfiguration Gospel reminds me of a question spiritual writer Annie Dillard poses in her book, *Teaching Stones to Talk*:

Why do people in churches seem so cheerful, like tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? It's madness to wear fancy hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offence, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.ⁱⁱ

The waking God is what Moses encounters, in the Exodus reading, in the image of a devouring fire. And in the Transfiguration, Peter, James, and John experience an overwhelming affirmation of Jesus' divinity. Notice how today's psalm, epistle, and Gospel *all* echo God's proclamation: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." That leaves little doubt as to who Jesus is.

Today, Jesus is joined by Moses and Elijah, two of the greatest prophets of Israel. His face is transformed – shining like the sun itself. His clothes become dazzling white, leaving no doubt that he is the Son of God made flesh.

When you watch Peter, James and John respond to this incredible spectacle, you might imagine that their reaction would be one of overwhelming joy, at what we've come to call a "mountaintop experience." (That's how we got that phrase by the way.) All they can think of is preserving the moment: "Let's make three dwellings here for Jesus, Moses and Elijah." Let's freeze this experience in time, so it will never end.

Isn't that how each of us feels about our own "mountaintop moments," we grasp them, squeezing every bit of joy and wonder out of them, staving off the inevitable "return to the normal."

I remember just such a moment in my own life: the Cathedral in Burlington, VT, had sent me proudly off to seminary, the first person whom they've done this with in years. So when a

beloved parishioner, George, died, they asked me back to preach at his funeral, which would have been my first sermon. I arrived, puffed up like a peacock, checking out the pulpit in my new robes – I bet my face was shining like the sun.

Now, our worship isn't anywhere near as beautifully organized as Father Daniel does here at St. Paul's, so when they realized that someone had actually forgotten to light the candles, they turned to me. As the packed congregation watched, I first lit the altar candles. But no matter how hard I stretched, the Paschal Candle was simply too tall to reach. Ever practical, without thinking, I slid one of the altar chairs over and climbed up. I should have brought a crash helmet.

You see, like this floor, the slate floor was so slippery that the chair began to slide, with me aloft, holding high the flaming candle lighter. The chair and I bounced down the two steps of the altar, and made a bee line for George's ashes. Thankfully, we missed by mere inches. I wish I could say the same for the Paschal Candle. We collided, the candle flew way up in the air, and its glass top shattered all over the floor.

And me? While the congregation held its collective breath, I rode the chair right down the middle aisle, till midway, we both came crashing down. I solemnly rose, picked up the chair and candle lighter, and began processing back to the sacristy, just as the ushers equally solemnly were cleaning up the glass. I heard one parishioner whisper loudly, "Who is that idiot?" *[Laughter.]* To which the parishioner next to her replied, "Oh, that's no idiot - that's our seminarian." *[Laughter.]*

Back in the sacristy, the Dean sighed, "Paul, I'm just not sure the Cathedral has enough insurance to let you on the altar again." I assure you, that when I came to St. Paul's, I did not tell Father Daniel that story. *[Laughter.]*

What a painful reminder of how short-lived mountaintop experiences can be. I'm sure that no one heard a word of my sermon with those vivid images emblazoned on their minds.

Moses felt a terrible letdown. If you read the next chapter in Exodus, you'll find that when he descends from the mountain, the people are worshipping an idol, a false God. He's so upset that he breaks the Ten Commandment tablets. Afterwards, he has to climb up the mountain all over again, re-negotiate the whole deal with God, in the hope that God will forgive God's people. The comedown was pretty dramatic for Peter, James, and John as well. You see, what we don't hear in Matthew's version of the Transfiguration is what Moses, Elijah, and Jesus were actually talking about. Luke's Gospel clues us in. He describes how they were discussing the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, his return to Jerusalem, and presumably his impending crucifixion. Maybe this explains the apostles' urgency, even the desperation they may have felt, as they begged Jesus to remain on the mountain, to build dwellings there safe from the impending doom.

Jesus, of course, is not interested in sepulchers for the dead, but a living faith that allows us to persevere from our highest mountaintop experiences, all the way to the darkness of our deepest despair. Jesus knows the apostles still have a lot of work to do – teaching the world a whole new understanding of what it means to love and to serve, through the example of Jesus' own suffering and death.

And so, he comforts his friends. “Don’t be afraid,” he says, and he tells them that he will be raised from the dead. And he leads them back down the mountain, with the promise that no matter what happens in the future, he’ll stick with them, as brother, companion, and friend - every step of the way.

The point of all of this, of course, is that if you’re willing to commit to follow Jesus, it’s guaranteed to be a pretty amazing ride, full of dizzying highs and crashing lows, and everything in between.

If we’re willing to put on our spiritual crash helmets and life preservers, like prayer and worship and service - the building blocks of a beloved community. I guarantee you that Jesus will walk with us the same way he walked down the mountain that day with his friends. We’ll see him in every person we meet. And if we stay close enough to each other, we’ll feel his comfort and strength, his wisdom and inspiration, his constant presence. Close enough that we can’t help but follow him – up the highest mountains, and down into the deepest valleys, as living examples of the greatest love story the world has ever known.

ⁱ I’m grateful to the Rev. Hilary E. Cooke for sharing these sermon insights about the power of Jesus’ prayer, and relating them to Annie Dillard’s work.

ⁱⁱ Annie Dillard, *Teaching Stones to Talk*