

Matthew 17:1-9
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Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Rev. Robin Long

- <17:1> 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."

The Memory Keeper's Daughter is a popular novel that is being discussed in book group clubs across the nation. It is a page-turning story about betrayal and the search for redemption. The description of the story on the back cover reads as follows.

This stunning novel begins on a winter night . . . when a blizzard forces Dr. David Henry to deliver his own twins. His son, born first, is perfectly healthy, but the doctor immediately recognizes that his daughter has Down's Syndrome. For motives he tells himself are good . . . he asks his nurse to take the baby away to an institution.

After that momentous choice, the doctor's life becomes increasingly complex as he continues to lie to his wife, his son, and himself about his decision. In an effort to forget his betrayal, he takes up photography, first as a passion and later as an obsession. The basis for his interest is described later in the story.

He thought of his own photographs: he tried so hard to catch each moment, pin it in place, make it last, but when the images emerged in the darkroom they were already altered. Hours, days had passed by then; he had become a slightly different person. Yet he had wanted so much to catch the fluttering veil, to capture the world even as it disappeared, once and again and then again. (264)

Though we may find fault with the doctor's initial decision to give away his daughter because she had Down's Syndrome, I don't think any of us can fault with him for wanting to freeze time and make the good moments last. Don't we all, at times, wish we could freeze time, stop progress, and just keep things the way they are? Any parent knows this feeling. I remember sitting in a restaurant with Nathan when he was about three months old. He was asleep and snuggled into the spot between my neck and my shoulder. I could smell his sweet little baby smell, feel the tickle of the little puff of hair on his head, and hear the soothing rhythm of his steady breathing. Two tables away was a family with a toddler who was alternating between screaming, crying, squirming, and throwing things. In that moment I wished I had a magic serum that would keep Nathan his sweet little baby self forever. I had glimpsed the future and it

scared me—it scared me a lot and I wanted time to stop right there and then with my sweet little infant’s head resting on my shoulder.

What moments in time have you wanted to freeze so that you could hold onto them forever? Perhaps it was your last visit with your grandchildren. Or maybe it was the last time you were able to see an elderly loved one. Maybe it was in school after you made the winning shot in a basketball game. Maybe it was the first time you set eyes on the one you love and you were filled with the electricity, excitement, and anticipation of new love. There are plenty of moments in this life that we wish we could live forever because they are so sweet, so precious, and so remarkable. And so, we do what we can to draw them out, we take pictures or video to remember them by, and we write about them in journals and letters with the hope that we can preserve the moments forever. It seems inevitable that as humans we want to latch onto what is good and comfortable and hold onto it so that it never slips away.

Jesus’ disciple Peter knows the desire to hold onto the good times. In this morning’s gospel passage we read of how Peter wanted to take hold of a moment, a sacred moment on a hilltop with Jesus, and never have it end. Now I must admit that until I read this story with an eye to Peter, I didn’t really understand it. I remember learning about the Transfiguration during my youth when a Sunday School teacher brought a dirty rag into class and then right there before our eyes soaked it in bleach and it became gleaming white. I understood that that happened to Jesus on the hilltop, that his robes became so white that they were blinding. I also understood that Moses and Elijah—both of whom were long dead—returned to earth to witness the Transfiguration. But other than that, I didn’t really understand what this story had to do with us.

But Peter’s role in the Transfiguration resonates a whole lot more with me than a blinding white robe or two famous dead men coming back to earth to visit with Jesus for a while. Peter’s response is so utterly human and practical. When he finds himself on the hilltop with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah he recognizes that he part of something big and, wanting to keep things just the way they are—he offers to build them homes up there. He is under the impression that this could be a lasting thing. Wouldn’t it be amazing if Jesus, Elijah, and Moses would just stay put up there on that hill. People would flock from across the nations to sit at their feet and absorb their teachings. It would be so handy—sort of a one stop spiritual needs shop. Have some questions about one of the Ten Commandments? Go straight to the source and ask good ol’ Moses. Wondering what some of that Old Testament prophecy means? Ask Elijah, he was wise and faithful. Lose your eyesight and need to see again? Get someone to lead you up to the hilltop to visit Jesus and he can heal you. It’s a business plan that any SCORE member would endorse. And certainly Sandy or Vicky couldn’t find fault with such a fabulous location—after all in ancient Israel it was all about location, location, location and what better sight for a one stop spiritual needs shop than a hilltop overlooking the gorgeous Galilean hillsides. Peter is making good sense here.

But Peter’s thoughts on the hilltop are interrupted by a voice booming from the heavens saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” Peter hits the ground and begins to shake with fear. In a moment he feels a hand on his shoulder and the voice of his friend Jesus telling him to get up and to not be afraid. But when he looks up the scene has changed—Moses and Elijah have gone, Jesus robes are no longer a dazzling white, and Jesus

begins leading them back down to the base of the hill. So much for Peter's plan for the one stop spiritual needs shop. And as if the situation isn't confusing enough for him Jesus goes on to say "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." I imagine that Peter replied, "Dead, what do you mean dead? I just offered to build you a house up there. If you are truly the Son of God you could have lived up there forever. You could have been safe and comfortable and famous and rich. And now you're talking about dying? You're only 33 years old, for Pete's sake. Don't say such things."

And here in lies the point of the story of the Transfiguration for me as I've studied it this week. Peter was right, Elijah, Moses, and Jesus could have been safe, secure, and happy for eternity up on that hilltop. But Jesus realizes that he did not come to earth to be safe, secure, and happy. Jesus came to earth to show people God's love, mercy, and compassion and he can't do that from a hilltop. Jesus can only do that kind of ministry if he's willing to get down from the hilltop and enter the towns and homes and synagogues of people in great need. Jesus can only do that kind of ministry if he's willing to leave the hilltop so he can touch sick people, and listen to hurting people, and be with poor people. As the old saying goes, a ship is safe in the harbor but ships weren't made to stay in the harbor.

And what is true of Jesus here is true for Peter and the other disciples and it is also true for us. If we're going to follow Jesus, we have to get off the hilltop. We may very much like the way our lives are right now. We might be wanting to hang onto our comfort and wealth and security. We may want to remain ignorant of the dreadful situations in which some people live, the plight of those who are enslaved, and the stories of children who are starving to death as they search through piles of rubbish for a food scrap in a garbage dump. But friends, if we are to be disciples, we are not meant to stay in our hilltop places. We are not meant to just come to church once a week to get our charge of warm and fuzzies, leave here singing "And he walks with me and he talks with me" or "What a friend we have in Jesus" and then continue on with our lives as we've planned them. No, my friends. This story of the Transfiguration calls us to leave our hilltop places, to be willing to part with our security, comfort, and wealth—our Feel Good theologies--in order to show the love of God to others.

Lent, which begins Wednesday, is a time when we come off of the hilltop. We've been enjoying a post-Christmas high. But Lent is the time when we come back down to earth and contemplate what is coming. Now I've heard a lot of you grumble that you don't like Lent because you don't want to feel bad. But that's not what Lent is for, not to make you feel bad. Quite frankly, Lent's not about you at all. Lent is about Christ, about considering his life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection and what it means to follow him. And quite frankly, following him is not easy—it's hard, it's the hardest choice we can make in this life. When we make the choice to follow Jesus, we make the choice to follow him off of the hilltop—leaving behind the comfort, security, and all the best things in life we've worked so hard to be able to enjoy.

Though it's a comforting image that gets us through the hard times, we aren't called to be frozen in the moment of walking with Jesus in the garden. If we follow Jesus into the garden, we must also be willing to follow him to that other garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, and then the next day to Golgotha, to the cross, to suffering and self-sacrifice and sadness.

The choice to leave the hilltop with Jesus sounds intimidating and we may think there's no way we can do it. But during this Lenten season, I challenge all of us to figure out how we can do more to show God's love to a world in need. And it doesn't have to be huge, start with what's do-able for you. Last week I was speaking with Kay Myers, a social worker at the school. During our conversation she mentioned that they could really use some more Youth Friends, that there are so many children in the school who need a mentor. Going to the school once a week to be a Youth Friend is a way to leave your hilltop. There are also many people in our community who are looking for a faith family like the one we have here. They need our warm welcome, our appreciation of diverse view points, and our displays of Christian love. Inviting them to come to church—even though it means they might take your pew or make things a little crowded—inviting them here is a way to leave your hilltop. Pulling out your checkbook to make a big donation—even though you'd rather use that money to buy a bigger TV or a newer car or to take a longer vacation—making the sacrifice and writing the check is a way to get off of your hilltop. And these are just a few examples—there is the Women's Resource Center, Leelanau Christian Neighbors, committees here at the church, the Good Will Inn, the community meals program, the baby pantry, the list goes on and on. There are so many opportunities to get off of our hilltops, to show God's love to others. And that, for today, is what the Transfiguration is about—about our willingness to not just walk and talk with Jesus in the hilltop garden, but our willingness to follow him off the hilltop to be his disciples in this world. Thanks be to God for this awesome opportunity to follow Christ—may we have the courage and strength to get off the hilltop and get to work—for God's sake.