

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, February 27, 2022

Luke 9:28-36

Now it came to pass, about eight days after these sayings, that He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray. As He prayed, the appearance of His face was altered, and His robe *became* white *and* glistening. And behold, two men talked with Him, who were Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep; and when they were fully awake, they saw His glory and the two men who stood with Him. Then it happened, as they were parting from Him, *that* Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah”—not knowing what he said.

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were fearful as they entered the cloud. And a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!” When the voice had ceased, Jesus was found alone. But they kept quiet, and told no one in those days any of the things they had seen.

Reading this familiar text earlier this week, I was struck by a sentence I hadn’t really noticed before. When Luke tells this story, he says that Peter and his companions were *weighed down with sleep*, but they stayed awake long enough to witness God’s glory.

It’s not usually the typical report given the disciples. Usually, they do fall asleep, do doze off, do miss something they ought to have seen, heard, comprehended.

But not here, not in this story. It seems they were aware that whatever was about to happen, it was not to be missed, even if they were exhausted. And that seems a logical conclusion to make when you’re on the top of a mountain with the Son of God. Maybe it’s not the best time for a nap.

Do you remember the last time you fought off sleep? And not because you were behind the wheel at night, or up at 2 a.m feeding a baby, or at church halfway through a sermon, *but because you really didn’t want to miss something?*

I think of my friends who used to attend the opening day, midnight showings of Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings. They waited with building anticipation throughout the week, so excited to see some of their favorite characters and stories come alive on screen, and then despite weighted eyelids and a diminishing capacity to absorb and compute any information, they sat in the dark theaters sucking down their coca-colas, inhaling their popcorn, and staring intently at the screen. *It was worth it*, they assured me.

And I think of drives through Northern Michigan or Tennessee hill country when I could have easily dozed off in the passenger seat but wouldn’t allow my eyes to shut.

I remember a flight I took from LA to San Francisco in college. My friend and I left the bachelor pad of her brother at 4 a.m. where we had tried to sleep on the couch for a couple of

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, February 27, 2022

nights with our jackets bunched up as pillows under our heads. Her 22-year-old brother had not yet mastered nor even considered the art of hospitality. So by the time the plane to our next Spring Break destination was up in the air, we were exhausted, fighting hard to make it, and desperately needed the drooling on the pillow kind of sleep.

But the sun was rising, orange and pink and luminous, and through my window seat the coast of the pacific ocean was just the left, and so I nodded in and out and in and out, the whole flight, because wow, it was stunning.

Can you remember the last time you fought to stay awake because you didn't want to miss something?

Peter and James and John must have sensed something was about to happen on that mountain, and they sensed rightly.

Today we come to the end of the Epiphany Season, where we remember those events in which the identity and mission of Jesus were revealed and explore how our own identities and missions are revealed. In some ways, it seems strange that the transfiguration of Jesus would have been necessary at all, considering all of the hints the disciples were given along the way; the story of his birth, the voice coming down at his baptism, his healings and teachings and what must have been the intense energy that surrounded him. Alas, we are human and we tend to miss a lot of revelatory moments, so all of the stops are pulled out here... On a mountain.

Jesus, the man they ate and laughed and wept with, stood there, changed—his clothes dazzling with light and his face, radiant... talking with two long-deceased but revered prophets from of old.

Clearly, he was more than Jesus from Nazareth.

These stories are of course told in hindsight by a community of faith that write post-Resurrection, as they seek to remember, connect, and assign meaning to their experiences. This experience wasn't primarily an informative one—imparting information about this fellow's special relationship to Almighty God. It was a relational one. It was an experience of being bathed,
filled,
blinded,
even exposed by God's piercing light.

It was the final revelation before the trek to Jerusalem and all that waited them there.

Is it any wonder Peter and company wanted to stay a bit longer?

Jesus, why don't I make you some dwellings, some booths so we can camp out for a while?

We're told his statement was dismissed, but Peter's longing is understandable.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, February 27, 2022

Who of us hasn't wanted to bask in a moment of resonance, of fullness, of communion with God and one another when it finds us?

When I was about 12 years old, my parents and I made a trip to the Grand Canyon. It was grand and amazing and terrifying and beautiful, but I imagine like many who make that trip, an equally gratifying treat was the short visit we made to Sedona, Arizona, on the way there. With her stunning backdrop of red sandstone formations that glow in the sun or the moonlight, Sedona is something to behold, and really and truly, you have the feeling that you're in the midst of some sort of altered reality. When I returned home, I continued to hear stories from others who had experienced holy moments in Sedona, so much so that these days I expect those stories and am no longer surprised. Delighted, but not surprised.

On our own visit, my parents and I made the long trek up the pedestrian walkway of the famous cathedral rock, moving slowly and laboriously because my mother had metastatic cancer and I had a fever and a really bad case of strep throat. I had not managed to stay awake for most of the drive leading to Sedona, though mercifully, my mother did. This was a trip was on her bucket list, a list that had taken on much more importance in the past couple of years. It was physically demanding, but once we were all at the top, it was worth it. My 12 year old self enjoyed it, but I sensed that for my parents it was more than enjoyment. They had been transported elsewhere as they gazed out, so I left them and wandered around the gift shop. When I found them again, they were at the altar in the chapel and they were praying together. I learned later that when they had approached the Table, the bible was open to her very favorite chapter and verse.

Needless to say, we lingered there for a while, soaking it in.

Perhaps we give Peter too hard a time for wanting to stay on that mountain. Surely, he wasn't suggesting that they stay there forever. Perhaps he just wanted to *preserve* the moment... the way ancient peoples built altars where they'd experienced something profound, or the way some of us buy souvenirs in the gift shops of places we want to recall once we're back "in the real world."

Nevertheless, God was provoked by Peter's suggestion. Peter's commentary is God's cue to come close, terrifyingly close in a cloud, and the idea of staying any longer is put to rest. God's voice thunders. Or does it whisper...so much so that they had to travel farther into the cloud to hear:

This is my Son, my chosen; listen to him!

It begs the question, *listen to what?*

I think it's rather safe to assume that God was invoking statements Jesus made in the moments and days before the trek up the mountain. The very last "sermon" that he gave before the trip was all about taking up one's cross and following him. It was a call to radical discipleship...a call not only *point* to him but to accompany him as he did his sacrificial work with and for the world.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, February 27, 2022

When God said, “listen to my son,” perhaps that last teaching was what God had in mind. It would certainly make sense. Peter’s desire to make some dwellings and stay on the mountain, understandable though it was, betrayed his resistance to the messy work of discipleship. And to that resistance, God said *No. You do have to go back down the mountain and to the life that awaits you there. This holy moment is not an end in itself.*

“The life that awaits you there” is captured in the text that directly follows this mountaintop one, where the disciples who were left behind are trying and failing to heal a child in the presence of his desperate and pleading father. In the lectionary, these verses are put in parentheses, as if they are optional. No small number of biblical scholars point out that by making those verses optional, we the contemporary church have fallen into the same trap as the disciples on the mountain, basking in our mountaintop experience of the Divine, or perhaps longing for it, as those disciples who left at the foot of the mountain probably longed.

In the valley below, another beloved son, a father’s only child, is suffering from violent seizures. “It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him,” the father explains, the sentence forming only because parents can do amazing things when their children are about to die. “I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not,” the father continued.

In the valley below, this is what Jesus was greeted by when he descended the mountain with the three; a father in despair, and 9 disciples who were wringing their hands. Jesus is furious: “How much longer must I be with you and bear with you?” He exclaims.

It’s a side of Jesus that can be painful to see.

Juxtaposed as this scene is with the glorious Transfiguration of the Lord, the conclusion is rather clear:

The disciples failed to recognize that the Transfiguration was about them, too. They too were being called to change, and to be agents of change.

And Jesus is just done with the pleasantries; time is running out.

Today as we witness what the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church calls a “fratricidal war” between siblings baptized in the same baptismal font, I can’t help but remember that for Orthodox Christians, the Transfiguration of the Lord is one of the great feast days, as central to the gospel narrative as the birth and resurrection. It is the scripture that forms the basis for much of their theology:

-In Christ’s transfiguration, we see the potential of human nature, that we humans are not totally depraved but can be restored to our original glory, made as we are in God’s image.

-In Christ’s transfiguration, salvation is inaugurated. We are saved by sharing in the transfiguration of Christ, getting caught up in the cosmic transformation of the whole world.

-In Christ’s transfiguration, the earth which is fallen but essentially good is returned to its original goodness, transfigured, transformed by the grace of and the power of God.

So friends with so many in the valley below today, what do we do?

I don’t want to be caught by Jesus, wringing my hands helplessly, unable or unwilling to participate in the healing of the world, in the healing of the pain right in front of us.

I wonder, today, what that participation looks like.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Sara Dorrien-Christians
Sunday, February 27, 2022

-Maybe it is praying without ceasing. For restraint, for creative solutions, for peace; for Russians who support a war of aggression to be Orthodox first, claimed and moved by their God before their nation. For Russians bravely taking to the streets to be guarded, guided, and strengthened by the power of Love.

-Maybe it's researching how to most effectively bring aid to the Ukrainians who have stayed and Ukrainians who have fled; maybe it's committing to a deeper read of what has happened in that part of the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

-Maybe it's tending to the suffering of another a little closer to you, a transgression of justice that's not halfway around the world but connected —as all injustice is—by the invisible threads of human vanity and pain and fear.

The mountaintop experiences are only as salvific as what we do on our next trek through a valley. The transfiguration of Jesus was never an end in itself, but rather the beginning of our own transfigured existence.

So today, with Ukrainians who fear for their lives and with Russians who rally and Russians who reel, with a world that watches and waits and weeps, may we rest in the steadfast hope that is the transfiguration of all that suggests we do not bear the imprint of God into all that confirms we do. And may we work in the steadfast strength for the things that make for peace. May we listen to him.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother of us all. Amen.