

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, March 2, 2025

As we enter into our time of scripture, I invite you to join me in our prayer for illumination. Let us pray.

Gracious and holy God, you have called us out from our places in the world to be gathered here together to hear your word as it speaks across the centuries to us. Enlighten our hearts and our minds that we might feel your presence in a new way, that we might be enlivened and that we might be prepared to carry your light out into the world. Amen.

Our scripture reading this morning comes from the ninth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning with verse 28. I invite us to hear these words from the early church.

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking about his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep, but as they awoke they saw his glory and the two men who stood with Jesus. Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us set up three dwellings: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah," not realizing what he was saying. While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them, and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my beloved; listen to him!" When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.

On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met Jesus. Just then a man from the crowd shouted, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child. Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it mauls him and will scarcely leave him. I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not." Jesus answered, "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." While he was being brought forward, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. And all were astounded at the greatness of God.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Many of you may be aware, some of you may not, that I am a Texan. My mother's side of the family is Seventh Generation Texans. There is furniture in our house that came from Tennessee in a covered wagon. Funny story—the very first time I met Claire Stallings, long these many years ago, she asked where I was from, and I told her Texas; and she looked at me very discerningly in

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that way that she had, and she said, “You don't talk about Texas enough to be from Texas.” So today I'm going to do my state proud and tell you a little bit. I was born and raised 30 minutes from where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed. Just in case any of you didn't know, Texas was its own nation, once upon a time, and we chose to join the union. I went to school in the county where the Texas flag was designed. Many of my classmates still right now grew up to farm land that was given to their ancestors as part of the first 300 land grants that Stephen F. Austin wrangled from the country of Mexico when Texas was still part of that nation. I did share with Claire Stallings when she said that to me those years ago that she's right. I don't talk about Texas enough, but I framed it in a quote from the journalist Molly Ivins. Molly Ivins was known to say that her love of Texas was a harmless perversion, and she only discussed it with consenting adults. So like many Texans of my generation, I turned 18 and left. I didn't leave Texas immediately. I turned 18, and I went to a Presbyterian college in north Texas—Austin College. Might as well have been Oklahoma. We were 15 minutes from the border, and that was a very long way away from Southeast Texas where I grew up and where I was raised, and I graduated AC and then went to Seminary in Atlanta, met my husband there, and we just continued to move East. So I graduated high school and left home and what felt like ‘toured the wide world’ but was really only Southeast America. We lived in Atlanta for four years and then North Carolina for five; and right after Ainsley was born, God was doing something in us, as God is wont to do, and we began searching for new calls. I mainly held—in the Presbyterian Church you can say, or you could—I don't know if it's still true—states you were not interested in. So, like it was not Alaska, not New York, and a couple of things that James and I agreed upon, that we knew we weren't going to look. We mainly stayed in the South. That's where we were both familiar with and what we knew. I did a lot of visits to Florida, and I should have put not Florida on my list. It was not a good fit for us. But this all led to me ending up being interviewed very seriously by First Presbyterian Church of Lawrence, Kansas, where the University of Kansas is located. Funnily enough, James and I both went on interviews for jobs in Kansas on the same March weekend. We flew out together and were picked up by our different committees at the airport and went our separate ways. And it was March in Kansas, so everything was still very gray. And we got in the car with the chair of my search committee and began driving to Lawrence, which is about 45 minutes from the airport in Kansas City. And once we got out of the bustle of the airport, I kind of took a deep breath, and it sounded...I think it sounded in the car kind of like a huh.... And my host, who was driving, immediately reassured me. She was like “I know, I know. It's gray and everything's dead. It's not always like this.” And I took a moment to figure out why I had sighed deeply. I didn't realize I had made that sound, and I assured her that it wasn't the color, wasn't the color of the ground and the sky and the clouds that looked like it was going to snow, even though I didn't know that's what clouds look like at that time. It was...we got on the highway and for the first time in a very long time, I could see from horizon

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to horizon, and something inside of me relaxed. Something eased inside of me, because when I left Texas we went to Atlanta, which was beautiful, and I saw spring for the first time; and then we moved to North Carolina, and I was in the land of the pines, and you can see exactly this much of the sky. And I didn't know that I needed the whole sky or that I wanted the whole sky until I stepped off that plane, and something inside of me settled. It was a deep moment for me—a holy space. I can see the same thing happening to my husband the closer we get to the Blue Ridge Mountain mountains. He...his whole demeanor changes. The way he breathes changes as we are headed toward his holy place, his special place.

Our text this morning finds us in a place that centers Jesus's life, a holy place, a mountaintop. There are so many scriptures that talk about Jesus sneaking away to pray for some solitude, for an experience with the Divine. Throughout the Bible people retreat to mountains to encounter God. You know the plains girl in me needed the big sky. Some people need the mountaintop. In our scripture Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jesus all go and see God, experience the Divine on the mountains, a place where Heaven and Earth seem more porous. Seems a little thin the dividing lines between them. As David shared, today is Transfiguration Sunday, and it marks this halfway point on our journey from Christmas to Holy Week. So we gather today to celebrate this moment in the life of Jesus, in the life of the disciples, where things are beginning to become clearer. What is coming next is beginning to become clear, or at least it's supposed to become clear. Immediately preceding our text today in the ninth chapter of Luke, Peter proclaims Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus asks him, "Who do you say I am?" Peter says, "The Messiah, the Holy One of Israel." And then Jesus proceeds to tell about his coming passion. He tells the disciples about his death and his resurrection. Our text says eight days later. Now that's plenty of time for all of that to sit and settle with the disciples. Jesus takes Peter and James and John away with him, away from the crowds, to pray. And there on that mountain he was transfigured. Jesus is transformed. His face shone, his clothes shone, and two of the founding fathers of Judaism are appearing there with him on that mountain—Moses, who stands for the beginning of the Jewish faith, the center founding father, and Elijah, who the Hebrew scripture says will be standing with the people at the end of time. The bookends of Judaism are standing there with Jesus. It's a wild and dramatic moment as they talk. I can only imagine the disciples lift up their eyes and see this happening in front of them. It is not at all what they expected. And so Peter, like many of us, wants that moment to last. He wants to build a permanent space that they can hold on to that feeling; and, yet, almost as soon as he voices that desire, there's the booming voice of God. God's message is very familiar to what was said from Heaven during Jesus's baptism. But here God is speaking not to gathered crowds but to the disciples. This is for their benefit. They're being asked to listen, which is something the disciples are not always very good at doing. Peter's response is human. He rushes things; he misunderstands. He speaks when he should be silent, and God has to declare

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forcefully, “Take a moment, slow down, listen.” And understandably, the disciples fall on their face with fear and trembling as they get a harsh reminder of exactly who they are dealing with—the God who created heaven and earth.

Now normally that's where our scripture for this Sunday would end on a Transfiguration Sunday, but the Narrative Lectionary, which we have been following over the past couple of years, makes a very bold statement by combining that Transfiguration text with a text of Jesus healing someone. If you've been with us for the month of February, you'll know that we have been following some healing texts from the Gospel of Luke. Jesus healed the man with the withered hand, the Centurion servant, the Widow's son. He spoke kind words to the woman who anointed him. And in our text today Jesus once again encounters someone in deep pain, a father who is crying out for the health of his child. The text makes it clear that this man has done everything that he can think of to do. He's even asked the disciples and they cannot help, and so he sees Jesus and calls out for assistance. Now combining these texts so that we hear them in worship today forces us to keep the Transfiguration as part of the larger narrative of God. It recenters our understanding about what's happening at Transfiguration on the redemptive work of God. Sure, Jesus went up that mountain, and the disciples are reminded that God is holy. God is entirely other than us, majestic and wild and powerful, and yet that God is present with us. The God who spoke on the mountaintop is the God who comes down to hear the cries of that man whose son is possessed. The God whose face shone with brilliance whiter than snow is the one that re-enters the messiness of the world. The text itself is clear. 8 days after he taught he went up to the mountain. But the very next day after the Transfiguration, he comes down into the midst of the people, because God is at work not just transfiguring Jesus, but transfiguring all of creation, a creation that is marked by suffering and pain. Our God doesn't stay transfixed in one point in time shining on that mountain. Jesus comes down into the messiness where he is needed—even his own messiness. It doesn't make us comfortable to hear Jesus say to the gathered crowds, “You perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you?” It's messy down here in the valley, but we can't stay on the mountaintop, because there is always trouble in the valley. We have seen it for centuries, and we see it again right now played out on national and international stages. The line that we have created between us and them, whoever the us and the them might be, seems starker the last few years. It runs through homes and families and workplaces. We see it when we watch people celebrate, gleefully celebrate the pain and suffering of others. We see the pain of the valley when we watch leaders turn their backs on the most vulnerable amongst us. We see it when the enemy, whoever the enemy is, has proudly claimed that they deserve whatever punishment they get. Our text today reminds us viscerally that the glory of God's presence and the pain of our world cannot be separated. When we go to the mountaintop, whether like me it's that big sky, whether it's beside the lake, whether it's in still quiet moments

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or on a retreat, when we experience mountaintop moments, they're not something to be hoarded or protected. They are precious to us and they should be, but they should not be locked away and set on a shelf and remembered fondly. These experiences give us the strength and the courage to reenter a broken world again and again and again.

Friends, when we experience the greatness of the Living God, we are changed; and that experience of God means that we see the world, ourselves, and others differently as well. Pastor Heidi Newmark says it this way. "What happens at the mountaintop is a vision to carry us down into the world. Up there we get a glimpse of unimagined possibilities, things we cannot see at ground level." So do we live our daily lives as a testimony to that vision, to those moments? Do we stand up for voices that have been silent? Do we call out injustice when we see it? Does our heart break for the pain of our siblings around us? Or friends, do we take the easy path, the one of least resistance that takes that magic experience and puts it away, because if we lived that presence it would disrupt our lives down here every day?

The truth is we don't know where we're going to go when we truly experience God. That makes us a little uneasy as it should. In our text the disciples go from the mountaintop to the valley to the fear of Jerusalem and then out into the world carrying God's good news. It's a perilous journey but one that God walks with them. As we begin to walk our journey of Lent starting on Wednesday and continuing as we mark the way to Jerusalem, do we carry that majesty, that otherness of God with us as changed people knowing that we are called to change the world? That is truly my hope this day and all days. Amen.