

Transfiguration of Our Lord (February 14, 2021) Text: All Lessons
“When the Music Fades . . .”

“When the music fades / All is stripped away, / And I simply come, / Longing just to bring / Something that’s of worth / That will bless Your heart.” begins the worship song “The Heart of Worship” [Matt Redman, © 1997, Thankyou Music]

It raises the question of what does happen *“When the music fades . . .”*? Or, to put it another way, what must it have been like for Peter, James, and John to come down off that mountain? Here they had ... seen prophets (how they knew who it was remains a mystery to me); watched Jesus in brilliant display; heard the voice of God. What were they to do now? What can you do when your life has been so thoroughly and gloriously interrupted?

If today you had experienced such a moment, could you see yourself ... Heading back to work on Monday? Frittering away the afternoon watching yet another basketball game or re-run of “Law and Order”? Cleaning the toilets and running the vacuum cleaner for the rest of the day? Most of us could not possibly answer that question because we have not come close to anything like the experience of those three disciples. And most of us would have to admit that our imaginations don’t carry us far enough to consider how we would react.

So, is the problem that we don’t know how we would react; or is the problem that we have had no such experience?

Many of us like our faith to be up here, in the left brain — logical, expected, under control. Few of us have had myriad experiences in the right brain — creative, explosive, out of the blue. Could it be that you have had such experiences and did not know how to process them??? A lot of us speak about mountaintop experiences ... upon how many mountaintops have you stood?

Peter was so caught up with his mountaintop event that he wanted to

memorialize it. I have often in the past spoken of Peter in this event in ways that emphasized how foolish was his idea to construct booths. In a recent article, Sarah Henrich, Luther Seminary Northwest Professor of New Testament, wrote: *“Moses, Elijah, and even God are not the only signs for the alert that God's reign are coming. Peter, contrary to popular portrayal, makes the connection that is too obscure for us to make. According to some Jewish expectation and as stated in the book of Zechariah the prophet (see 14:16-21), God would usher in the new age, the ‘Day of the Lord,’ during the Feast of Booths. This God-commanded festival kept by Jews for centuries, was considered a possible time for God's taking control of God's creation and beginning the age of shalom. So Peter’s question about building booths is neither laughable nor mistaken. Peter is clear that the end times are coming and the Feast of Booths was upon them.”*

Chalk one up for Peter. He wasn't trying to keep the mountaintop experience going. He was trying to express his joy and faith in the experience of the moment. Yet his timing was off.

Apparently, he had forgotten Jesus' prediction of suffering and death, made just the chapter before today's text. Did he think God had just trumped Jesus' prediction and advanced the timetable? We don't know. But the word from the cloud, ***“Listen to him,”*** is a reminder to pay attention to Jesus' reliable words (including those predictions made just the chapter before). Jesus will not be a superhero as we understand it, but as one who lays down his life and thus opens glory to many.

I have found, for most people, that concept is too right-brain, because logic suggests that “die to win” is not a good strategy. Yet this is what Jesus came to do. Now I know someone will want to pipe in, *“But He does win in the resurrection!”* That misses the point.

Listen to Jesus as He comments on the prediction of His Passion and death: ***“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the***

sake of the gospel, will save it.” So the question before us becomes: “How do we lose our lives?” The answer we need to discover is: “Come down off the mountain and get to work.”

There are two very good reasons to come down from the mountaintop.

First, we are needed “down here,” in the valleys and slopes where most of our lives are lived. Mark’s Gospel is sometimes characterized as preaching a message of “glory through suffering.” It is probably better to see that message as “glory through service” — which may result in suffering. Bearing the cross does not mean going through needless pain and agony — Jesus did all that for us. But now He bids us to take up the cross of caring for one another and for those we do not yet know. And such caring must be, Jesus tells us, “*for the sake of the gospel,*” not just “do-good-ism” but true ministry that connects others in their suffering to the suffering Christ. With any act of mercy that we discover needs to be done comes the equally important task of bringing people to know Jesus.

The second reason why we come down from the mountaintop is that God meets us in the valley and is at work there. Although it is often a very good idea to spend time alone with God to “recharge,” it is not that we must retreat from society in order to meet God. God is in every moment, every situation. Any time we spend alone with Him serves to equip and position ourselves to recognize He is there in the present moment.

We do not, moreover, need to maintain a certain level of purity in order to stand in God's presence. Jesus tells us the pure in heart are blessed, but as to God’s acceptance of us ... that has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God and His love. Nor do we have to achieve; our status before God is not based on what we do, but on what Christ did. So we cannot provide for ourselves a holiness that merits God’s attention.

Jesus has reversed the natural human tendency to avoid the unclean, the broken, the sinful folk around us (we see Him do the opposite so often in His ministry). Dying to self means doing just this: knowing that God is with us, no matter what.

Moments atop the mountain – both physical and emotional – can give us insight into our lives and purpose. Even just a glimpse of what lies on the way ahead can help us make our way down to encounters with both God and neighbor.

So we are invited, on occasion, to go to the top . . . to catch a glimpse of glory . . . to stand in awe and wonder . . . to be consumed by the majesty of God. But not to stay there . . . even if wanting to stay means that we understand the significance of the moment: the Kingdom breaking in. When the hoopla atop the mountain is completed . . . *“When the music fades . . .”* we descend to be about the task God has called us to pursue.

One other point needs to shine through (yes, pun intentional). On the mountaintop, in the plain or the valley, and especially in the deep trenches of life, we need to keep paying heed to the voice from the cloud: ***“This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”*** Listen to His teaching to guide and direct you. Listen to His promises to comfort and console you. Listen to His wisdom to enlighten you. Listen to His loving voice that calls you again and again into His forgiving embrace.

The appearance of Moses and Elijah in today’s event conveys many messages. One of those is surely that God has guided His people through the ages using those He sent to them. Again, Professor Henrich: *“God has not left God’s people without guidance, without help, without hope ever. From Moses to Elijah to Daniel to Jesus, perhaps to Mark, writer of this ‘good news’ (Mark 1:1), and including many more persons of faith, we continually are helped to see the way of God in the world, as well as the promise for God’s future for all of us. Perhaps we have to trust the glimpse that others have had: all the twelve, for instance, were not part of this experience and Peter, James, and John did not talk about it until after the resurrection. But the glimpse, even of others, is a gift to all of us from God.”* And so listening to Jesus will also need to encompass telling others what we hear Him say.

For too long, we have kept to ourselves — told one another that our religion was a private matter, not to be discussed with others. If you are

sold on the idea that you don't know what to say about your faith, I have to challenge whether or not you have spent sufficient time listening to Jesus.

Mark concludes today's Gospel with this verse: ***“As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”*** On this Sunday before we enter into that season of reflection and penitence called Lent, as we bury the “Alleluia” *“symbolizing our voluntary restraint of praise,”* as we mark the forty days that are called “days of fasting,” as we prepare ourselves for the final denouement of Palm Sunday and Holy Week and Good Friday, through all of that this one fact remains true and guides all we have to hold onto: *“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”*

You don't have to keep that to yourselves anymore; you can go and tell everything you have seen and heard.

Amen.