

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO THE FIELD

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, February 23, 2020

Scripture: [Matthew 17:1–9](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

For the last few weeks, we have been on a mountaintop with Jesus, listening to the sermon on the mount. For all we do to follow Jesus, three weeks of pure, uninterrupted preaching from the man himself can sometimes startle. We've had the lifting up of blessings for those who the world would not consider blessed, we've had the invitation to be salt and light... enhancing and lighting the world for others, and we've had the difficult teaching to go beyond the letter of the "rules" and deep into the heart of a rule of life with God.

Today, we're up on a mountain again, but the crowds that gathered to listen to Jesus preach have gone... in fact Jesus and his disciples have gone on together through a lot, a lot of teaching, and a lot of ministry together.

Today, Jesus takes a break with 3 of his disciples and goes up high again. But here, Jesus will not be the one who speaks, and the experience will be larger than a sermon for those three that accompany him. Listen in.

SERMON

Part of my gig is to study and think about the ways in which people think and act religiously, and to notice trends in those sorts of things. A place where folks who like to track this stuff often go is to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which has been asking Americans questions about their faith lives, beliefs, and practices since 1962, and asking the same questions so we can see patterns and changes in our beliefs.

One that they've been tracking is this question: *Have you ever had a religious or mystical experience?* In 1962, 22% of Americans answered yes to this question. By 2009, it had more than doubled... to half of all Americans. ^[1] (Evangelical Christians and Black Protestants report much higher than average experiences, mainline protestants and catholics much less... not sure what that means for us...)

It is an interesting part of our cultural moment, or cultural timeline, I guess: We are—all of us, whether we attend a faith community like this one or not—apparently increasing our sense or awareness of the mystical... or, maybe I'm wrong and the world is actually getting more mystical, but somehow I doubt that.

I went and shared in bible study at Oceanview this week... and we read this scripture. We talked a little about mountaintop moments... amazing moments when we especially feel God's presence with us. I hope you know some of these experiences... I think for many of us they resonate so strongly with what the disciples experience in the scripture... a sense of radiance, a sense of being transported out of the every day... and I know there can be so many things in our every day that we long to be transported from. That make us want to linger or somehow capture those moments in a box so we can live in them all the time...

We know this right? I think it's one of the reasons that the technology that seems to constantly march forward for the last 200 years is photography. We want to capture those meaningful moments so we can relive them whenever we want, so we can live in them. The reality is the same one the disciples encounter... you cannot actually set up camp and live forever in wonder.

To capture our desire to live even more into these sorts of moments, experiences that connect to the spiritual are broadening their reach, and their price tag:

- I read recently about the number of people who would declare themselves religiously unaffiliated, but have begun the practice of having a spiritual director... a person trained to
- I don't need to tell you that pretty much every place in the world is expanding in yoga classes, or meditation groups.
- Especially interesting up here, I have noticed that we have more and more organizations offering "pilgrimage" experiences, intentionally spiritually grounded walks in nature... beautiful nature, by the way.

What I notice about all these kinds of experiences is that, like the disciples, they assume a certain amount of luxury in your life. The disciples are so unencumbered that they are willing and able to drop everything in their lives and stay up on top of the mountain for as long as possible. Think about that, that is a remarkable amount of freedom... they are without requirements of family, of home, I would bet that they are assuming they would continue to live the kind of life where people bring stuff to Jesus and they hang out!

For us, many of the myriad spiritual experiences that are sprouting up cost a lot, and they cost in time, too...

The lingering question that remains is: what does all this searching—and finding—of the mystical mean for us in our real lives? What does it ask of us?

What we get from the heavens is the voice of God which we heard at the Baptism of Jesus:

┆ *This is my Son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased.*

But that's not all we get, we get an addition now:

┆ *Listen to him.*

I have to say, if I were one of the disciples, and there are just **so many reasons** it is good that I was not, I would be feeling pretty snarky. We only have to read about 13 chapters of Matthew with Jesus speaking to get to this part... they had literally been traveling around *listening to the man preach* for I dunno, months? Years? I think they probably had the listening down pat. It wasn't that he didn't have anything interesting to say before this point in the story... I'm sure, just like some of the folks that we are listening to so much these days, Jesus had a bit of a stump speech that you could begin to get a little tired of... but really, it was pretty compelling stuff all that sermon on the mount. They have been, and I would like to say that I have been, and we have been, too, LISTENING.

"Listen to him." And this is the only sermon I really have on this text, the only sermon that Jesus has at this point is this:

Get up, and do not be afraid.

Get up, and go down. Get off the mountain and back into people's lives. Get up, and go down back into people's lives... into our lives which are so fragile and broken and hurting that the literal Son of God is going to die.

That's the sermon at this point, not a lesson, not a speech, not a parable, not an examination of the glory of the shining top of the mountain...

The sermon is down below. The sermon is, "watch this." Watch Jesus begin the march to Jerusalem to confront the very heart of his tradition and call for finding the mystical in the lives of the people he proclaimed blessed at the beginning of his preaching: the poor in Spirit, the hungry for righteousness.

I hope you get those mountaintop moments. I hope they take your breath away. I really do.

But I also think that some of our work here as a community of faith is to get up, and go down into life unafraid to find the glory of God that lives inside the everyday, the mundane, even the broken, the hurting, the injustice, and the fragility of life itself. Our task is to engage that Spiritual practice of mining the everyday, not just the mountaintop, for the presence and wonder of God. For it is all wonderful, wonderful and awful, and beautiful and terrible... but you will miss it if you settle for a comfortable or safe wonder away from it all... Because there? We don't change. We don't grow. We don't discover God more and more with us... We have to Get up, and go down... it will be a journey for all of us... but it is worth it... because how much more meaningful will it be when we find the radiance and glory of God in the stuff of our everyday lives, rather than in a place and time which so few can reach?

Listen to Jesus. Listen to his life. Don't just listen to his words. Listen to him. This is the journey of faith. To change. To be different. To be transformed co-laboring with God. To get up, unafraid, and point our feet downhill. Amen.

1. <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/> ↩