



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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FEBRUARY 26, 2017
TRANSFIGURATION SUNDAY

Was Peter Wrong? Matthew 17:1-9; II Peter 1:16-21

Enter almost any cathedral and you will find the Apostles somewhere on display. They may be imbedded in stained glass, each with his noble crest and symbols of his ministry. You might find them sculpted and larger than life, praying or proclaiming into eternity, world without end. Amen. All of the Apostles are considered to be saints now and is easy to forget their humble beginnings. When they walked with Jesus, they were, after all, rather ordinary people.

Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John were all fishermen. Fishermen are good folks, but their work is hard and messy and smelly. Although they make their living on the water, fishermen tend to be rather earthy people, if you know what I mean. Levi (or Matthew as we know him) was a tax collector, an unpopular guy doing a job which everyone despised. It could be that Philip was also a fisherman, being from Bethsaida where Simon Peter and Andrew lived. Like Jesus, Nathaniel was from the hill country, from the village of Cana. A serious-minded, studious man, he might have been a rabbi himself. We know little about Thomas, James the son of Alpheus, or Thaddeus who is sometimes referred to as Bartholomew. We know that Simon was a zealous man, possibly a political zealot. Judas Iscariot was the only apostle from Judea. Initially Jesus trusted him since he handled money for the group, but he betrayed Jesus for greed or to force a rebellion, we don't know. All in all, it was a mixed group of ordinary men whom Jesus called to follow him.

Without question, Simon Peter stands out from the rest. He was the first follower called by Jesus and involved in many episodes of Jesus' ministry. He was brash and bold, talkative and impetuous, stubborn and insecure, insightful and ultimately dependable. Jesus nicknamed him "Peter," which in Aramaic meant "rock." There are a number of reasons that the name fit him perfectly.

Simon Peter must have intrigued Jesus because he kept him close by his side. In fact, if there was an inner circle of the apostles, Peter, along with

James and John, was in it. So it was on one occasion, that Jesus took these three along on a special trip up a mountain. Listen to Matthew tell the story:

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 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." 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!" When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 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."

Matthew 17:1-9

Peter is often criticized for his offer to build a retreat center on the top of the mountain so that their little group could stay there forever with Moses and Elijah. For a faithful Jew, nothing could be better than to be with the two great heroes of the faith, one representing the law, the other the prophets, the two pillars of Jewish faith. Jesus never answers Peter. Once the prophets vanish and Jesus returns to his normal self, they pack up and head down the mountain to re-engage their ministry. Was Peter wrong in what he said?

This passage begins with the words, "Six days later." Six days later from what? Jesus and his closest followers had been traveling and stopped at Caesarea Philippi. It was there Jesus engaged them in a conversation about popular opinion of him. "Who do people say that I am?" he wanted to know. They answered that some people thought he was John the Baptist whom Herod Antipas had killed. Other people thought he might be Elijah, Jeremiah, or another great prophet from the past. When Jesus asked them who they thought he was, Simon, like an excited schoolboy, waved his hand and answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Jesus blessed him and told him that God had revealed that answer to him. Then he gave Simon his nickname, Petros, the Rock, or Peter, as we know it (Matthew 16). You also remember that Jesus began talking about his suffering and

crucifixion which Peter insisted would not happen. In a complete turn of events, Peter went from being the teacher's pet to the dunce in the corner when Jesus admonished him and called him "Satan."

So it was that six days later, Jesus took Peter and James and John up the mountain where at some point, Jesus was transfigured, Moses and Elijah appeared, God spoke from the heavens, and Peter thought it would be a good idea to stay up there for a while. Was Peter wrong? As had happened six days earlier, had Peter missed the point of it all? Was he not in tune with what Jesus was doing?

Why do you think Jesus took the three disciples with him? He was known to go off alone to pray and think. His ministry began alone in the wilderness and, until the night of his arrest, he often took time for himself to sort things out. Surely he invited Peter, James, and John so that they could benefit from time away. Surely he intended for it to be a teachable experience.

Peter was right. It was good for them to be up there on that mountain. And what an amazing experience to see Jesus transfigured and Moses and Elijah appear! Who wouldn't want to camp out there a while? Who would not want an experience like that to go on forever?

Jesus took his friends on a retreat, an extended sabbath, a respite from the responsibilities and demands of their usual days. It was an occasion to rejuvenate body and spirit, to rest and be inspired, to contemplate their calling and prepare for what lay ahead. It was good for them to be there. Peter was right and Jesus did not rebuke him. I wonder if he did not smile and nod at Peter's suggestion and then instruct them to pack up their things because it was time to go. They had experienced a vision of what God had been doing for hundreds of years which would reach its zenith in Jesus himself. The light which emanated from Jesus had shined into their own souls. Certainly it would have been good to stay awhile and enjoy the glow of that moment, but the light within beckoned them to return to their work. They were still ordinary men from a little fishing village in Galilee, but they had glimpsed what God was about in the world and it was time to get to work.

This story is perfect for stepping from the season of Epiphany into the season of Lent. During Epiphany, we celebrate the surprising ways in which God in Christ revealed himself over and over. During Lent we look and listen for God in our world.

Peter was right, it is good to find time and place to allow God to visit us. It is good to open ourselves to the various ways in which God reveals God's self to us. It is good to reflect on what God has done in the past in order to look forward to what God will do in our future.

As we enter the Lenten season, I encourage us all to allow ourselves experiences in which we better understand who God is and what God is doing. We can take some time each day to open a space for God. Taking five, ten, or fifteen minutes in the morning, early afternoon, or evening is a great opportunity for God to visit us. Take a mini-sabbath and turn off all distractions: the TV, the radio, the cell phone, the computer, the newspaper, and anything else that calls us away from ourselves. Sit or stand or lie still for a few minutes to allow your mind to put away all those things that are calling to you. Then pray or read scripture or meditate on a poem or song. Find some way that opens a doorway to God and invites God into your experience at that moment.

For some of us this time may be a traditional devotion time where we read something inspirational and meditate on it. For others of us it might be something different as we experiment with various ways to engage God. Whatever works for you is what works for God. The important thing is to find some time daily to commune with God. This experience is part of the discipline, the learning, of Lent.

Jesus did not hike up a mountain every day, but found occasional opportunities for such experiences. In the same way, there are things we can do each week that further open us to the Spirit of God. Bible study and worship are two primary ways we engage our faith. Our Sunday School classes have two purposes: to provide discipleship and fellowship. By studying scripture and discussing the ways in which our faith relates to our lives, we grow as Christian believers. And by sharing ideas and struggles with one another, we discover support and friendship which further strengthen our faith.

Worship is our offering to God. We offer praise, gratitude, and adoration to God for all that God is and does for us. Worship is primarily a communal experience. Although we can commune alone with God, it is good for us to be with other believers, to share our faith together, and to resolve how our faith will be lived. Worship is the most important thing we do as Christians. The journey of Lent begins with worship this Wednesday evening.

Like Peter and his friends, we come together to worship God and glimpse the holiness of Christ.

There are many other ways we can open ourselves to God. Just outside this sanctuary is a beautiful labyrinth which offers an experience of prayer and discovery. I encourage you to use the labyrinth weekly during Lent, if not more often. Devotional materials and guides are available at the Labyrinth and the garden surrounding it is a peaceful and wholesome place to be.

On Thursdays at noon you can join the Meditation Group for a time of prayer and silent reflection. Through a guided experience, windows are opened through which God can visit your soul and enlighten and calm you.

You can also find extended times for prayer and meditation on your own. A long walk, a bike ride, sitting outside in the sun, resting in a comfortable space at home, sitting in this sanctuary when no one else is here are all ways you can create your own space to commune with God.

Like Jesus and his friends, you can also go away somewhere to a park, the mountains, the lake, the beach, a retreat center or some other place where you can have a day or two apart from typical responsibilities. An extended time can offer refreshment for the soul and the body. Jesus often went off to what scripture calls “a lonely place,” not because it was a sad place, but because it was a good place to be alone.

Peter was right. It was a good idea to find times and places to push all distractions away and invite God to visit us. God’s people have always sought ways to commune with God that are special and intentional. We should do no less.

There is a stained glass window that adorns Boe Chapel at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. It is located in the balcony, above the pipe organ, and is a picture of the transfiguration of Jesus. Dressed in white with light emanating from within, Jesus stands on a mountain with Moses, Elijah, Peter, James, and John. Alumna Elizabeth Palmer tells us that when the afternoon light shines just right, the figure of Jesus glows. That is, all of Jesus glows except his feet. The feet which hold Jesus upright are not pretty, radiant feet.

They are ugly, skinny, bony, smelly-looking feet. They are the same feet of the humans standing on the mountain—ordinary, common feet.¹

Peter was right. It is good to have moments when the divine breaks in upon our ordinary lives and we experience God in ways no one else may ever believe. But Jesus was right, too. When God visits us to bless us, it is also to prepare us to return to the ordinary life given to us. Those “feet of clay” must take us back down the mountain to continue the journey to which God has called us. During this Lenten season, may our ordinary, earthy feet take us to places where God is revealed to us and on to other places where we help reveal God to one another. Amen.

¹Elizabeth Palmer, “Living the Word: February 19, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany,” *The Christian Century* (February 1, 2017): 19.

February 26, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Beautiful Savior, Lord of all nations, just as Jesus led his disciples to a mountain-top experience of faith so that they could see the fullness of his glory, you continue to speak to us, to reveal yourself to us, and to send us out to share your good news of grace for all people. Your transforming light reveals a new vision and a restored sense of purpose for us as your children, and so we come now to offer ourselves to you in worship and to give thanks for the many gifts we have received from your gracious hand. We thank you for work we are given to do and for the strength and skill to accomplish it. We thank you for your Spirit who moves among us, energizing us to complete the tasks of servanthood, even when our motivation is weak and our resources seem inadequate. We thank you for the companionship and encouragement we find in one another and for the wonder and diversity of color and language and opinion and creativity which reflect the mystery of your image throughout the human family. We thank you, O Lord, that in your generosity, you continue to supply these gifts even when we misuse or squander them, or even when we fail to recognize them.

Redeeming and Sustaining God, as a people who have experienced the abundance of your goodness and grace, we have been called to work and to pray for our brothers and sisters out of our love for one another and our common love for you. We lift up to you those who are sick and those who grieve and pray for your healing touch upon them. We pray for peace for those whose lives are disrupted by chaos and violence. We ask for your mercy for those across our city and around your world whose physical and emotional needs overwhelm them and whose hope has abandoned them. Burden our hearts with compassion and generosity for your children and move our hands and feet to respond to their needs. Soften our hearts as well as our words so that we might treat our neighbors with the same dignity and care which Christ modeled in his encounters with others and our lives might overflow with the mercy which you have so extravagantly shown to us. We make these and all our prayers in the name of the One who came to reveal the full extent of your love, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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