

**“Resting at the Mountaintop”****The Reverend Allison Caudill****St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky****Last Sunday after the Epiphany – 22 & 23 February 2020**

This is one of those times of year when following a lectionary of assigned readings can be a bit confusing. For the past few weeks, we have been following along as Jesus delivers his great Sermon on the Mount, an incredibly long, important, and at times challenging passage in the Gospel of Matthew. In this sermon Jesus sums up and expands on the law and the prophets, reflects on prayer and ministry, and teaches his followers how they should strive to live as the family of God. Great crowds of people from all different places followed Jesus up the mountain to hear his teachings and to be close to him and one another. These great crowds were astounded by his teaching, as we continue to be challenged and uplifted by the same words even now, thousands of years later. And now, today, we have leapt almost ten chapters ahead from some really tough teachings of Jesus, and find ourselves on a different mountain.

We are again with Jesus, but the crowds are gone, the great sermon has been given as well as many more sermons and miracles of faith. Peter has recently confessed Jesus to be the Messiah. Poor Peter’s correct answer has been met with a gag order, as Jesus tells his disciples of the suffering and death that awaits him. The disciples are finally starting to get it, and as always Jesus throws them for a loop. They finally see Jesus as the one sent to save them, and now they’ve been told that they must take up their crosses, deny themselves, and follow their leader to his death. We can imagine how confusing and discouraging that must have been. And now here they are today, headed up a mountain to pray with Jesus. After the labor of teaching and healing, Jesus asks some of his closest friends and followers to come away a while, to retreat. Even as he

walks on toward the cross, Christ turns back to his people and invites them to rest with him. The journey has been hard, the news is weighing on their hearts, and they are exhausted.

In this mountaintop moment, Jesus reminds us of our deep need as creatures of God for Sabbath, for rest and for self-revelation. The Son of God brings his friends to a high place away from the crowds, he literally asks them to hike up a mountain with him, to be by themselves, to process the reality of the suffering that is to come and the hope of the kingdom beyond it. When they reach the place where they are to rest, Jesus turns to them in his fullness and glory, in a moment of intimate self-revelation, of honesty born of his love for them. Until this moment, they had seen Jesus and known him as first the son of Mary, then as teacher, and finally as Messiah. But in this moment of transfiguration, in this moment of rest, the disciples see and know that Jesus is God, fully divine. Because they heeded the call to come away, to simplify and step away from the demands and the expectations, their eyes and hearts were clear and open to receive this blessing, this gift.

Despite weariness and fatigue and awe, they are present to witness this moment, and Peter, understandably, wants to hold onto it. “It is good for us to be here,” Peter says. “Lord, it is good.” He isn’t wrong. But Peter doesn’t even know what he’s said. He’s interrupted. In his eagerness to capture the moment, Peter sees it break. Already blinded by the light of the transfigured Jesus, the disciples are engulfed in cloud. As quickly as they see Jesus clothed in glory, the sight is taken from them. In its place is a voice, the same voice that named Jesus as beloved at his baptism. When the cloud lifts, and the voice is quiet, they see Jesus alone. Gone is the overwhelming vision of their teacher in white, again they see the man they know and love. The weight of the journey they are on, the fate that awaits them in Jerusalem, returns. They are faced with the fact that Jesus is a human with a body. Soon they will have to face the fact that

this body can die. I think that's what the voice in the cloud meant by "listen to him." The disciples, as is often the case as it is with all of us, just don't get it yet.

The wish to memorialize, to freeze time, to capture beautiful things is a human one. To seek out and experience our own mountaintop moments and to capture them as best we can feels natural. But, like Jesus and the disciples, we eventually have to come back down. We retell this story again and again because we know that we need to see Jesus in his glory and be reminded that he was fully human, but also fully more than that. We get to join Peter and James and John on the mountaintop for a moment, as they glimpse Moses and Elijah on either side of the Messiah. Peter and James and John see the humanity of Jesus clothed in dazzling white, hear the voice of God proclaiming Jesus' divinity. They see figures on either side of Jesus who represent for them a history and a narrative that defines who they are as people of God. And yet, this mountaintop moment is not defined by its production value, but its simplicity.

The transfiguration was an opportunity for the disciples, and is today an opportunity for us, to glimpse the divine glory of Jesus. It is important for us to notice how the story begins, how they reach the moment of revelation. Incredible miracles and hope-filled sermons were accomplished among the ordinary places and people of Jesus's time and place. The life and labor of our Lord took place alongside the lives and labor of rich and poor, young and old. But in this particular story, Jesus and his friends leave the crowds behind. Time and time again, Jesus invites his followers to pause, to rest. Jesus reminds his people to pray, to spend time studying scripture, and to make space for sleep, food, and family. He not only tells us that these things matter, but shows us through his own example, stepping away to pray and be close with those who know him best. On the night before he died for us, Jesus Christ shared a meal with his friends, and prayed to his Father in heaven. Sometimes the greatest moments of clarity, the

brightest examples of God's presence among us, are revealed in the everyday moments of the valley, in our work and in our relationships and in our service of others. But today, Jesus reminds us that our eyes are clearest when we breathe deeply, when we step away from the expectations of the world and step into the intimacy of his love for us.

Peter was right, it is good for us to be here. It is good to come away for a time, to summit the mountain and leave our heavy toil and the demands of our lives in the valley below. We always have to come down, to take back up our cross, because the journey continues. But don't miss the glimpse of glory we will witness next. On the mountaintop, the disciples witnessed heaven coming down to earth. This happens again, every time we gather ourselves in prayer, every time we turn toward the altar to celebrate the Eucharist together. The transfigured Jesus is with us in his divine glory in the breaking of bread and sharing of wine. The Eucharist is a mountaintop moment, a simple meal that is transfigured before us. We have an opportunity to share in it. In the bread and the wine, we see heaven on Earth. In coming to the table, we accept our Lord's invitation to rest. In resting with our Lord, we hear the voice of God reminding us "My child, beloved. With you I am well pleased."