

“Where Do We Go From Here?”

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

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Luke 9:28-36

Today you begin a journey every church goes through at one time or another. An uncertain and often confusing journey from the end of one pastorate to the beginning of another one. It will feel at times like wandering in the wilderness, and there are certainly similarities. For some this journey will be maddening. For some it will be discouraging. On the other hand, for some the journey will be interesting and even energizing. How you react to this journey will in some ways depend on how comfortable you are with ambiguity, how much you can enjoy a journey and its scenery and unexpected stops, without knowing exactly when and where it will end. Today is the beginning of reflecting on what you will need for the journey and what posture you will adopt as individuals and as a community.

I can tell you right now after 30 years as a Presbyterian minister that the feelings of “Are we there yet?” and “I’m sick of being in this car” will be common. A balance between moving toward the destination and enjoying the journey will be essential but not always easy.

There will be those who hang back and skip regular worship “till THEY get a new pastor in there.” But those who reinvest in worship and prayer during this transition will surely find strength for the journey and an opportunity to grow in faith. So thanks for being here today. It’s a privilege to lead worship and to join you at the Lord’s table.

In some ways the quintessential mountaintop experience of the story of the Transfiguration feels a little off today. Misplaced by a week perhaps. I’m sure you had a grand celebration and farewell with Dennis that was something of a mountaintop experience. Today is by definition anti-climactic for you, so reading about this magnificent shining glory story may feel like a mismatch.

But all over the world Christians read this story today, the last Sunday before Lent. Transfiguration Sunday. Mardi Gras. The last festival before the journey of Lent, paralleling Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross. And so we align ourselves with our fellow believers everywhere and take up this story first on its own terms, and then asking what it has to say for THIS day and THIS moment in your story.

In our story Jesus goes up the mountain to pray and takes with him the inner circle of disciples, Peter, James and John. These are the same 3 who accompanied Jesus to the home of Jairus when he raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead. This mountain story happens about a week after Peter answered Jesus question, “who do you say that I am,” “You are the Messiah of God!” This inner circle goes up the mountain with Jesus for something special. And what happens is special indeed. Shining glory. An awe-some experience, filled with mystery. It’s a take-your-breath-away faith experience. All through the Bible, the mountain is the place where people encounter God. That’s how we get our expression, “mountaintop experiences.” A mountaintop experience refers to a moment of personal or spiritual revelation, an experience of true communion with God, a spiritual high. And this is surely that.

The comedy in the story is first that the disciples almost miss it because they’re so sleepy and then when they do see this dazzling appearance of Jesus, flanked by Moses and Elijah, they get this idea to capture the moment, freeze it in time, by building 3 dwellings, one for each of the divine figures in whose presence they are so thrilled to find themselves. How to capture this moment is surely the first reaction of anyone who has ever had a mountaintop experience. How to preserve this. How to never lose this incredible sense of the presence and power of God. How to capture forever this shining glory of Jesus.

But while Peter is speaking these words, “It’s good for us to be here . . . let’s make three dwellings,” a cloud overshadows the whole event and strikes terror into their hearts. We hear the voice that spoke at Jesus’ baptism confirming his identity

and mission: "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him."

And as the voice finishes speaking, everything goes back to where it was. Jesus is himself, praying alone, with the disciples nearby. No more dazzle, no more flanking prophets. And down the mountain they go, telling no one about their experience. The very next scene will be a needy crowd centered around a man begging for healing for his son. By the end of chapter 9, Jesus will "set his face toward Jerusalem," a journey that leads to the cross.

Jesus doesn't get to stay on the mountain and neither do we. Transfiguration Sunday always comes 3 days before Lent. The journey toward the cross is inescapable. Down from the mountain always means down into the midst of the world's needs and the demands of hands-on faithfulness.

For you, it's obvious that you don't get to preserve and capture and build tents for the wonderful experiences and memories of Dennis' long ministry here and of the celebrations you held to send him off. Let's stay right here on the mountaintop and watch videos of Dennis' greatest hits and wait till the next pastor gets here. Inspired, awed, and frozen in time. It doesn't work like that. You have to go down the mountain to deal with real life, not just the real life of figuring out the next steps in the life of your church and its ministry though it will sometimes feel like that's what it's all about: what do we have to do to get a new pastor in here? No, you have to go down the mountain to deal with the real life of following Jesus, of encountering the world and the community in all its need and responding with faithfulness and courage.

And here's where this story may be helpful for your church today. At the end of the day the journey you are on isn't a journey to get a new pastor. The journey you are on is a journey to follow Jesus, individually and together. Although the process of moving toward a new pastor will feel all-consuming at times, your reason for being isn't finding a pastor or even having a pastor. Your reason for being is following Jesus and being the hands and feet of Jesus in this corner of God's world.

And that's harder even than the Presbyterian Church USA process of calling a pastor. Harder. And much more life-giving.

What if your mountaintop experience isn't Dennis' ministry but God's call on your life? What if your mountaintop experience is God's call to this church to BE Christ's body in this community with or without a pastor, certain or uncertain, perfectly or imperfectly? That's an awe-some calling filled with mystery not unlike the moment of transfiguration. Close your eyes and imagine your congregation, gathered together and seeing the dazzling glory of God, shining in Jesus and flanked by Moses and Elijah, absolutely taking your breath away. And before you can quite look at one another and make a plan of what to do with this moment, the voice of God speaks to you --- I've chosen you for this moment, I've chosen you to recognize Jesus and to follow him and to be his hands and feet, his heart and voice wherever you go, to meet the world's need with love and compassion, with healing and hope.

You are on a journey. It is a journey toward a new pastorate and a new chapter in your congregation's wonderful story. It's a journey, small j.

But together we are also on a journey, capital J. The Journey. The journey of faith, following Jesus, embodying his love and mercy in a hurting world. Our journey brings us today to the top of the mountain. To remember and give thanks for those moments when we have glimpsed the divine in our own mountaintop experiences, in our baptism, at this table. Again today we taste and see that the Lord is good. We pause to remember and celebrate that we are part of something awe-some and mysterious and divine, something that ancient peoples described with the imagery of a shiny face and dazzling white clothes --- whiter than any earthly bleach could make them, another account says. We remember and give thanks that we are caught up in a cloud – overwhelming and terrifying perhaps – but a cloud that calls us to know that Jesus is not just brother, friend and teacher though we need him to be all of that. Jesus is also that awe-some mysterious divine God of heaven and earth come to be in and with and for us. And it is that mountaintop reality that carries us down into Lent, that carries us through an important transition in this congregation, that carries us through each step of a life lived following Jesus.

Amen.