

Two summers ago, we had a mostly younger group of high school students at the Montreat Youth Conference. Only one was a senior and had ever been before, so it was my job and duty to get those kids up a high mountain. Look-out Mountain is the classic climb for Montreaters, I explained to the youth, who seemed disinterested and quite content to play hide and seek in the house. Having been a mom of skeptical teens (the adults are always to be questioned) I knew I must press on toward the goal. Despite their moaning, I insisted, we were climbing Lookout for a group photo. It was not an optional activity. And just as I expected, they complained some on the way up..."We're sweating. We're tired. We're hungry. Our feet hurt." But once there, they were in awe of the view, and proud of themselves for getting there. Once there, every cell phone was coming up for photos. "Pastor, take one of the three of us over here. And how about all the crew over here. And one to send to our moms of the two of us from this angle." Last year, they were ready to climb that mountain, even on a rainy day.

Amazing things can happen on mountain tops. You can see the world from a different perspective. From the top, you feel powerful and small at the same time, as you look down on trees houses, or people below. We often talk about needing to get a bird's eye view of life. Moses went up Mount Sinai and there saw the glory of God and received the 10 Commandments. Elijah was drawn up by the sweet chariots to that bird's eye view. Moses represents the law and Elijah the prophets. The two of them appear with Jesus on the mountain of his transfiguration.

Before we hear the story, let me tell you what's been happening in chapter 8 of Mark. First the feeding of the four thousand from seven loaves and a few fish. Then some arguing with Pharisees who want the proof of a sign. Then the disciples still worried about food and Jesus having to remind them of the feeding of five thousand and then four thousand. He says, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Then Jesus heals a blind man, and begins to question the disciples,

"Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am? Peter gets the answer right "You are the Messiah." But he doesn't get the meaning of it all, because he is appalled that Jesus says he must suffer. That's when they get the very challenging message -- And the famous line *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 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. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"*

Let's hear the transfiguration story:

Mark 9:2-9

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain where they were alone. He was transformed in front of them, ³ and his clothes were amazingly bright, brighter than if they had been bleached white. ⁴ Elijah and Moses appeared and were talking with Jesus. ⁵ Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, "Rabbi, it's good that we're here. Let's make three shrines--one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." ⁶ He said this because he did not know how to respond, for the three of them were terrified. ⁷ Then a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice spoke from the cloud, "This is my Son, whom I dearly love. Listen to him!" ⁸ Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. ⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them not to tell anyone what they had seen until after the Human One had risen from the dead. (CEB)

It was said at his baptism and it is reaffirmed at his transfiguration. The voice from the cloud says, "This is my Son, my beloved, the one I dearly love. Listen to him" When life is confusing as it was for the disciples many times (and they had Jesus right there with them, just as we have the Spirit of Christ right here with us), the voice from the cloud says, "Listen to Jesus." When we see something that fills us with awe, when we have that mountaintop experience, we may have other faith leaders standing in the wings, but the voice from the cloud says, "Listen to Jesus."

When we are thinking that we must do something constructive, like build a shrine, a tabernacle, even a new sanctuary, then the charge is always, "Listen to Jesus." Don't listen to your fear. Don't listen to the other leaders. Don't listen to that voice in your head saying, "I must get up and get things organized." You know the saying, "We make plans. God laughs." It first started on the Transfiguration mountain. Actually Proverbs 16:9 We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps. The voice from the Cloud says, Listen first to Jesus. Then you'll know better, though not with absolute certainty, what to do.

Those of us who viewed The Shack on Friday night will remember the moment when Mack was struggling with his fears, his pain, and his regrets. He was in the boat, and a terror came over him. Much like the story of the storm at sea with the disciples, Jesus comes walking out to Mack and tells him to calm down and keep his eyes fixed on him. "Look at me. Listen to me. Keep your focus on me. You are going to be alright. You can face your pain and find healing." Says Jesus to Mack and to us. The voice from the cloud, in the Transfiguration Story, presumably the Spirit of God, is the one reminding us of who is in charge. But these mysteries are sometime hard to wrap our heads around.

We too, as faithful stewards of the mysteries of God must find the right way to deal with our uncertainties. Studies on stress reveal that people are far more stressed by uncertainty than by a predictable negative outcome. So that's why you'll hear people with cancer relieved to know the stage or the prognosis. The worst thing of all is not knowing what we are facing. We can deal with what we know. There is a certain humility and trust that must abide in those who keep Jesus' company. The disciples are never quite sure what Jesus is up to, nor are we, if we are honest about it. So beware of anyone who is absolutely certain of what Jesus is teaching, or how he is leading. We are not stewards of certainties but stewards of mysteries. Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 4:1 *Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.* (1Co 4:1 NRS) And those who are true servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries are not only able to live with uncertainty and trust, but they are looking for the divine spark of God in every human being, in every molecule of creation. The light that shines so brightly in the face of Christ has been given to the world, so we dare not despise anyone God has made. Every person is the beloved of

God – even if you cannot see it when they are sitting on their horn in traffic or being obstinate about their own ideas or positions on social media or being that family member who in the moment of your frustration, you cannot stand to be around for one more second! Even if others are acting out of evil impulses, the mature follower of Christ sees that God still desires to capture their hearts and draw them into a relationship of reconciliation and trust and healing. Servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries are looking at Jesus, so that they can handle anything that comes their way with faith, hope, and love, with a commitment to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

I find some comfort in seeing three of Jesus’ very closest disciples so dazed and confused. The Spirit had to speak through the cloud and remind them to listen to the Beloved Son of God. Even when we are confused and don’t know what to say or do, God is there, reminding us – keep your eyes on Christ. Listen to him. Look around and see the holiness of God in your midst.

As we head toward Lent, let us lean into the mystery of Christ, and away from our quest for easy answers. Be ready for the uncertainties of life. Be calm and patient when there are things you cannot control or manage. “Spend time in prayer, contemplation, and study. Listen for Jesus. Look for Jesus. You will hear him, and you will see him in so many unexpected, beautiful, ordinary, and extraordinary ways.” In the presence of the One who loves us most, we are always on Holy Ground, whether we are on the mountain top of awe-struck wonder or the valley of confusion and silence.

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