

“Like Any Other Parent”
Luke 9:28-43a
Transfiguration of the Lord

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Westminster, Greenville
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You and I just heard two stories.

The first story, the one that Allen/Christa read, is about the top of the mountain. The second story, the one that I just read, is about the bottom of the mountain.

Do you know anything about the top of the mountain?
I’m sure you do.

How many of you have ever climbed a mountain before?

I remember in my third year of college, I spent a semester abroad in China. There was one week in which our professor let us explore the country on our own. We could go anywhere we wanted, we just had to let him know where we were headed, and when we would return.

So I went with some friends to climb a mountain.

I’m not talking about scaling rocks here...I’m talking about a tourist site, kind of like a national park, in which there were steps and a path leading up the mountain.

It wasn’t difficult terrain, but it still took all day to climb.

At the top of the mountain was lodging run by Buddhist monks, a place where we had a good dinner, and a room to spend the night.

Then in the morning, when the sun rose—the view was spectacular. I’ll never forget that view...the first time I climbed a mountain.

Do you know anything about climbing a mountain?
Maybe it wasn’t a physical mountain, but you still had a mountain to climb.

Maybe it’s been with your career.
Or when you battled an illness.

Or perhaps in your personal life, there were obstacles to overcome—they weren’t your fault, and you overcame them, one step at a time, you made it—a steep hike, and you got to the top. It’s something you’ll remember for the rest of your life.

It’s immensely satisfying to find yourself at the top of a mountain.

Of course, that’s where Peter, James, and John find themselves, in our first story today.

They go up a mountain with Jesus.
And at the top, Jesus is transfigured before them, “and his clothes became dazzling white.”

Then Moses and Elijah appear.
Then a cloud overshadows them, and a voice speaks to them:
“This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!”

I’m not sure I can explain what happens on top of that mountain, but it sure sounds like a glorious experience...and yet, you can’t stay on top of a mountain forever, right?

You have to come back down.
Which leads to our second story for today.

When Peter, James, and John return to the bottom of the mountain with Jesus, they don't see their Lord transfigured in dazzling white. They see him surrounded by a crowd, and approached by a desperate father.

“Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.”

The child has an unclean spirit.
It convulses him.
It mauls him.
It will scarcely leave him, says the father.

Do you see what happens at the bottom of the mountain?
Instead of dazzling glory, there's the demonic.
Instead of a divine voice and vision, there's disappointment.

“I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not,” the father says.

To which Jesus replies, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?”

Who is Jesus talking to at that moment?
Surely Jesus is NOT chastising the father for his lack of faith.
He brought his son to Jesus!

Is Jesus talking to the disciples?
Maybe...but at least they tried to heal the boy.

Look, we heard two stories today:
The transfiguration of Jesus at the top of the mountain.
A frustrated, cranky Jesus at the bottom of the mountain.

Would any of you like to come up and explain these stories?

That's fine, you don't have to come up to the pulpit.
Because I have a better idea.

I'm told that in the Sunday School class for our middle school youth, and sometimes they are joined by our senior high youth, our splendid middle school and senior high teachers will engage the class in a brief discussion about the morning's sermon.

It's kind of like a review or a preview, depending on which worship service the kids in the class attend that morning.

So I have a question for all of you who are NOT teaching our middle school and senior high youth today: how would you feel about giving our regular teachers a Sunday off, and teaching THESE two stories that we just heard to our teenagers?

Any volunteers, to give our regular teachers a break?

[11:15a—some of you are thinking, thank God it's the late service, they've already had Sunday School, I'm off the hook. But that's no excuse...I'm sure you could do it.]

What, you don't think you could do it?
Sure, you could do it.

You see, I'm imagining that you would start with the metaphor of the mountain—and how the top of the mountain is what we all hope for...moments of divine glory, when life feels right, where God's love and light is made known.

And then you might ask the class how they deal with the bottom of the mountain times in their lives, when everything is NOT light and love, when failure or fatigue or disappointment seem to get in the way.

It would be a good way to start the class.
But our middlers and senior highs—they're a sharp group!

And one of them just might point out an important detail from the top of the mountain in our text.

One of them might say to you, "Teacher, did you hear what Moses and Elijah were talking about with Jesus on the top of the mountain?"

Hmmm.
You may have forgotten.

So you go back to the text, and read that part.

Chapter 9, verse 31:

"They [Moses and Elijah] appeared in glory and were speaking of his [Jesus's] departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."

And this really sharp student in the class would say to you:
Jesus' departure?

That sounds like they're talking about how Jesus died.

And you would say, Yes—that's right.

And then another student might chime in:

If they're talking about the death of Jesus, the arrest and crucifixion and suffering of Jesus at the top of the mountain... then that's not terribly different from the bottom of the mountain, because at the bottom of the mountain we have the suffering of a child, and just like any other parent, the father wants to help his child.

In other words, there's the anticipated suffering of Jesus at the top of the mountain, and the immediate suffering of a child at the bottom of the mountain...and don't you think that God's heart was breaking as Jesus suffered, just like the father's heart was breaking when his child suffered...teacher, is the top of the mountain really so different than the bottom of the mountain?

You, of course, being the sharp teacher that you are, you're not regretting that you volunteered to give our regular teachers the day off.

You're thrilled with this Westminster student.

So you say:

That's just where I was hoping you would go!

And you would tell the student that she's right.

At the top of the mountain we find Moses and Elijah talking with Jesus about how—in order to faithfully follow God—he's going to walk TOWARD suffering.

Which, you say to the class, seems to be a very important point.

Many times, we're tempted to put the glory of God over here, and hard times, difficulty, suffering...over there.

But the story of the transfiguration tells us something else.

It will not separate God from our suffering.

It brings them together.

And another of our Westminster teens shoots his hand in the air.
“You mean, God causes us to suffer? Wants us to be in pain?”

And you'll say no...no.

God does not want God's children to suffer.

And another asks you:
 Well, what about what's happening in Ukraine right now?
 Why doesn't God do something about all that, if God doesn't want
 God's children to suffer?

And you say: that's an excellent question.
 I don't know why God doesn't stop it.
 But I do think we know two things.

First: God does not want what's happening in Ukraine right now to happen. The suffering that Ukrainians are going through because of Vladimir Putin's evil actions—God's heart is breaking right now because of what's taking place.

Second: the Transfiguration tells us that we're not supposed to RUN AWAY from suffering. Whether it's at the top of the mountain with Jesus—or at the bottom of the mountain with the difficulties that life brings, doing what we can to help other people in their suffering—that's what these two stories are about.

Well, this generates a lot of discussion in the class, because someone points out that the disciples didn't help that boy with the demon at the bottom of the mountain. They tried to help, but they weren't able to help.

And you'll say: that's exactly right.
 Sometimes, we can help alleviate another person's suffering.
 And sometimes, we're helpless in the face of someone else's suffering.

But either way, we need to walk toward the suffering.
 Because if there's any place that we're going to find the God we know in Jesus Christ, it's the place where people are suffering.

That's what the Transfiguration is all about.

Of course, it always helps to offer examples when a person is teaching...an example of someone who "gets it"...who understands how the glory of God isn't found by running away from suffering, but by running toward it.

For example, you could tell the class about Dr. Paul Farmer.

As many of you know, Paul Farmer, who died earlier this week—he dedicated his life to offering medical care for the poorest people in the world.

He founded Partners in Health, which has helped establish hospitals and medical care in Haiti, in Peru, in Rwanda...

In the best-selling book, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, the Pulitzer-prize winning author, Tracy Kidder, wrote about Farmer almost 20 years ago. You could recommend the book to any of the teenagers in the class.

In the book, Kidder describes how one of Dr. Farmer's habits was to hike mountains.

Not recreational hikes.

Work hikes.

He would spend 7 hours going up and down a mountain in order to visit...say, two families—to see what's going on with the tuberculosis in their family.

Kidder writes:

Here's an influential anthropologist, medical diplomat, public health administrator...who has helped to bring new resolve and hope to some of the world's most dreadful problems, and he's just spent seven hours making house calls.

His critics describe it as an example of what's wrong with Farmer's approach.

Hiking into the hills to see just one patient or two is a dumb way [according to his critics] for Farmer to spend his time, and even if it weren't, not many other people will follow his example, not enough to make much difference in the world.

But Kidder goes on to point out that Farmer will keep making those hikes, *because if you say that seven hours is too long to walk for two...patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others', and the idea that some lives [are worth less] is the root of all that's wrong with the world.*

“The best thing about Paul is those hikes,” said one of his colleagues.

“You have to believe that small gestures matter, that they do add up.”¹

If you believe that small gestures matter and add up, then I hope you're still thinking about giving our Sunday School teachers a break, and stepping in for them.

I don't want you to sweat the assignment, so let me give you another example you could share with the class.

¹ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, New York: Random House, 2003.

Not too long ago, the philosopher George Yancy interviewed the Christian theologian Karen Teel for a series on religion and death. During the interview, Yancy noted that world-renowned physicist Stephen Hawking was skeptical about life after death.

He called it “a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark.”

Yancy then asked Teel how she, as a Christian, would respond to the charge that Christians are simply “afraid of the dark.”

Teel answered by telling the story of her mother’s death. She told how, at age 59, her mother was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig’s disease—the disease that Hawking died of as well.

My mother lived for three years [with the disease], Teel recalls. [It’s] progression was gradual and relentless.

“[At the end] she began to need help with everything:
eating...controlling her wheelchair, breathing.

“During Mom’s last weeks...I realized two things:
“She was going to die soon, and I believed that I would see her again.

“This had nothing to do with being afraid of losing her...We had known for three years...the precise manner in which we were going to lose her. But I also believed, with a conviction I had never before felt, that...she was going to join her parents, and one day I would see them all again.

“Before facing my mother’s death, I never really knew that I believed that life continues. But I know it [now] as I know the sun will

come up in the morning, as I know I'll get wet in the rain, as I know I love my own children.

“It isn't about fear; it's a gift and a mystery, this conviction that we come from love and we return to love.”²

Do you think you could teach some teenagers about how we come from love and we return to love?

I know, you're wanting to do it, you're just hesitant to be the first to raise your hand.

That's ok.

Because it occurs to me that maybe our regular teachers for middle school and senior highs don't need you to teach. They might want you to do something else.

You see, they might want to begin their next lesson by telling the class about a particular person in our church who works constantly for to show God's love, especially when people are hurting, to be a voice for the voiceless, or create a home for the homeless.

Someone who does not offer glib theological explanations for why bad things happen in God's world, and who admits that they don't always have all the answers.

Someone who is always willing to sit with someone in their suffering and their grief, even when they cannot fix it...

² George Yancy, “I Believed That I Would See Her Again,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020. I first read about this article in a book by Thomas G. Long and Donyelle C. McCray, *A Surprising God: Advent Devotions for an Uncertain Time*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

Our teachers might not want to talk about Paul Farmer or Karen Teel. They might want to talk about you. They might want you to come to the class, and just describe why you live the Christian life the way you do.

I hope if they ask you to come talk to their class...
because they want someone to tell the class what it's like to
climb mountains with Jesus...

I hope you'll accept the invitation.

(Amen.)