

First Congregational Church, UCC
February 26, 2017
Back up the mountain
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Matthew 17:1-9

In between the season of Epiphany and the season of Lent is this story of the transfiguration –there are some scriptures that only come around once every 3 years in lectionary – but this one is every year. I would have thought that after preaching on this story year after year I would get tired of it – but I have come to appreciate how many different ways this story can speak to us. And this year is no different.

What stands out this year is how this story fits in the overall story of the gospel. It is what you might call a hinge point in Jesus’ journey. There is the journey before the hike up the mountain and there is the journey after. Over the last 7 weeks we have traced bits and pieces of Jesus’ journey before. We began with Jesus’ baptism – with the words “This is my son the beloved with whom I am well pleased” and then there was the call to the disciples, and then we heard parts of Jesus’ sermon on the mount where the disciples were given new ways to think about who they were and what it meant to be a community that lived by teachings of Jesus. The pieces we didn’t hear, among other things, had to do with loving one’s enemies and turning the other cheek, and losing one’s life in order to save it. The focus before the mountain is on the teachings – these challenging, counter-cultural, life-changing teachings of Jesus.

And then there is the journey after. When Jesus and the disciples come back down from the mountain the focus moves the teachings of Jesus to the passion of Jesus. You can feel the story intensify as Jesus begins living out the very teachings he taught. Loving his enemies, turning his cheek, and laying down his life for his friends. That is the journey that we will follow in the season of Lent.

In between these two acts if you will is the experience Jesus and the disciples have on the mountain. in the overall narrative this is the midpoint, the transition point - this is where the first half of the story ends and the second half of the story begins. It is a pivotal moment. When they are gathered together on the mountain and they are enveloped in a cloud they hear a voice again say this is my son the beloved listen to him” –For Jesus I imagine this moment was a deeply spiritual and confirming and grounding moment – I am not alone God is with me and the law

and the prophets undergird me. For the disciples I imagine this was a scary and unnerving and inspiring moment all at the same time. Ultimately it was an experience that gave them the courage, in the face of all that Jesus has taught them about sacrifice and losing one's life and loving one's enemies – to continue to follow him anyway.

We have no way of knowing if the disciples wanted to go up that mountain or if they were resisting every step of the way. But it proved to be worthwhile. This time apart allowed them to be present to the mystery and glory that is God. And that time apart in God's presence provided something essential for both Jesus and the disciples to continue to follow God's call on their lives.

The more I thought about this story the more I began to relate it to the particular situation of where this church now founds itself. You too are entering an in between time, a time of ending and of beginning – this is a hinge moment, potentially pivotal moment in the life of this congregation, and I think the spirit is calling us to acknowledge this and calling us to “take time on the mountain” so to speak–

I first began to sense this after my experience in worship last week.

When I woke up last Sunday I had had a mild headache, and I thought it was slowly fading, but about midway through the service, it got so intense that I was starting to feel a bit nauseous. I don't get headaches like that very often, so when I do get one it is signal to me that I am most likely ignoring the emotional reality going on in me and around me.

And as I thought about last Sunday, there was a part of me that wanted to just keep moving forward – I made the announcement and now let's not dwell on the fact that I am leaving, pastor's come and pastors go and while it's sad, the pastor isn't what makes or breaks a community so let's get back to work being the church – and all of that is true – pastors do come and go – and churches do carry on and it is the people and the community and the faith that the share that forms the backbone of any community. And yet that doesn't mean there isn't still a need to acknowledge and honor the grief that almost always accompanies a change. It doesn't matter if it is a welcome change or sudden change or unexpected change, when there is a change in a relationship, when a connection is lost, pain happens, grief happens. And its not just the grief that comes in saying goodbye, it is also grief for the envisioned future that now may feel more tenuous.

And so I realized for myself last Sunday that even while I know this is the right step, there is still sadness in me, it is still painful to leave, and as many of you have

shared with me I know there is sadness in many of you. I know when I don't honor that reality I end up with a head that feels like it is going to split open.

It made me think of one of the mottos taught in the warriors for the human spirit training that I have been part for almost a year now

Don't fix. Don't avoid, just be present.

It's a motto that we come back to again and again because, of course, we are accustomed, trained, programmed, to do just the opposite. I see it in myself. I want to make this easy for you. My first instinct is to want to shield you from pain and sadness, But the wisdom here says don't. the wisdom here says instead, be present to it. Actually feel it. Because it's okay to be sad. It's part of life, it's part of change, even when we can see the good in it.

But this is not something we are taught to do in our culture. We're supposed to just get on with it, put our nose to the grind, and keep going. If this story has anything to say to us I think its this: something essential may be lost if we don't take the time to be present, to ourselves, to one another, to the Spirit. It is because they took the time on the mountain that they were able to see more clearly and confidently when they came back down.

In her book Active Hope Joanna Macy outlines a process that she has used with groups across the world to help them work through whatever despair or fear they are experiencing so they can continue find hope and energy for the world. The second step in this process she says is honoring the pain. She says when people actually honor their pain, be it for a loss of a loved one, a loss of a relationship, or a loss taking place in some part of world - it is out of that experience that they find new strength, new courage, new clarity to act in the world. She would say that pain is simply an indicator that you care. That the connection to that loved one, that relationship, that part of the world matters to you. It was and is significant to you. And when you remember that you care, you have courage to act. And here is what I know: I care about you, you care about me and most importantly we care about this community – whatever pain or sadness we feel tells us this community matters – to ignore that is to dismiss the real gift of who you are and what is happening here.

I get not wanting to climbing up the mountain – I get the sentiment of let's move fast, lets get this position filled, let's go on as we always do – but I think there is

something essential that you are to learn in this hinge moment. This is your in between time and it is sacred time. When I met with the executive board this week I suggested to them that they may want to slow down just a bit in this upcoming search process to give the congregation the space to be present to what they are feeling and allow that to inform and shape the direction in which you move.

I know it can be uncomfortable and scary to not just plow ahead, but you are not the same congregation as when I first arrived. A lot has changed, alot has just gotten started, it is worthwhile to pause and allow yourselves to reflect on what has happened in these three years so that you can be as intentional as possible as you move forward into the next chapter. And so the executive committee is moving forward on finding an intentional interim that be with you hopefully as soon as possible, and part of their work will be helping you continue to reflect and to present to guide you in the next steps to prepare you for your next settled minister.

In the meantime, I feel the Spirit leading us back up the mountain. Not to fix. Not to avoid. But to be present, to be present to ourselves, to one another, and to the Spirit. And it just might be that in that place the glory of God, the light of God, the transforming power of God will find its way into our hearts, and lead us back down the mountain ready to follow wherever the Spirit wherever it will lead us. Amen.

Opening Prayer

As we gather together this morning we pray: help us listen to you.

Help us open our hearts to your grace.
Help us believe in your truth, help us love as you love.
We are small and we become afraid.

Show us again your dazzling glory
hidden in the hum-drum
of our wondrous, ordinary, everyday lives.

Remind us that we one with you and that we are part of all that is.
In your name we pray, Amen.

Benediction

And now may God shine the light of glory into your hearts.
May Christ be with you and ever surround you.
And may the Spirit renew the image of God within you.
Let us go in peace to love and serve the world that the Lord so loves. Amen

Holy One,

We come before you,
many of us feeling like we have already been climbing a mountain.

Our loads are heavy,
with worry, with regret,
with fatigue, with illness,
with despair for all in the world
that is hurting, in danger, in bondage and more.

We trudge ahead, following you,
stumbling, hoping, praying...
breathing hard, hearts pounding, and yes,
even some of us are nimble and skipping.

Lead us Lord,
to the top of that mountain,
where we might be dazzled by your Light,
lifted by what is Divine,
filled by the sheer delight
of what is numinous and ethereal and grounded and real.

We pray this,
for ourselves, for one another,
and for the worlds in which we live in. Amen.