

“In the Clouds”

March 3, 2019

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

Jesus decided to take a break from all of the teaching and the traveling, the healing and the hollering, and got himself to a mountain to pray. Jesus does this occasionally in the gospels texts, typically after a major healing event, a miracle, or an intense season of debating theology with the Pharisees. Really, it appears that he does this whenever he has the chance or he finds solitude he can access. He took a few people with him, part of what we might assume were his inner circle of disciples, and they prayed.

While Jesus was praying, his face transformed. His clothes began to glow, shining and white. His face utterly changes. I am reminded of one of my favorite shows, *Dr. Who*, whenever the Doctor regenerates. The Doctor can have multiple lifetimes, and when one life cycle ends, the Doctor's body glows, shines, and then erupts with light. When regeneration is over, the Doctor is entirely different. New body, new face, new voice. I imagine something like this happening to Jesus on the mountain, but hopefully less painful and permanent!

Jesus has a glowing body, and two of the patriarchs, Moses and Elijah, have teleported to the mountain for a chat. They talked about Jesus and his impending departure, meaning his death, which was happening in Jerusalem later on. Moses and Elijah typically represent the Law and the Prophets in traditional historical critical interpretations of the passage. This moment of encounter, in one way of looking at the text, claims that their presence and conversation with Jesus signify their endorsement of Jesus and solidify his claim Sonship.

Peter, James, and John do not seem to know what is going on here. As a nice little nod to the Garden of Gethsemane when the disciples meant to guard Jesus fall asleep while he prays, these trusted three do not fall asleep. They are at least a little more on their game at this point in the ministry of Jesus. They hold off slumber and catch the whole encounter.

But, lest we give them a little too much credit, there appears to be a fumble. Peter, consistently our Gospel scapegoat, makes the first move, either out of fear or bravery, or a relatable mixture of both.

Peter says, “Let's build some tents! Aren't you so glad we're here?” Which feels like the equivalent of saying to Jesus, “You're welcome--I built you a blanket fort that you didn't want.”

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Jesus does not have a chance to respond to Peter because a Voice does it for him. A cloud, similar to the one that guides the people in the wilderness, covers them on the mountain. And from that cloud, the Voice declares, “Listen to my Child. I chose him.”

And with that, everything is back to the way it was. Moses and Elijah teleport back to wherever they were, the cloud disappears, the Voice stops, and all that’s left on the mountain are three confused disciples and Jesus.

Well, not everything was back to the way it was. You see, while Jesus was up on this mountain top glowing and communing with the patriarchs, another scenario was playing out at the base of the mountain. I imagine a father was pleading with the remaining disciples, the ones Jesus didn’t pick to hike up the mountain and pray, to heal his son. When Jesus gets back down the mountain, a crowd waits for him. I want to know, down below at the base of the mountain, could the gathering crowd see the glowing lights, the descending cloud? Were they wondering what took them so long to return? Why was Jesus up there when a child in need of healing waited down below? And why didn’t the remaining disciples bring Jesus down early as the crowd began to grow the longer that he was gone?

When I say ‘mountain top’ Christian, you may know the kind that I’m talking about. They have powerful encounters with the Divine, ones that are transcendent. They come back glowing from these moments while others are crowding at the gates, hoping for a glimpse of the glory. They can seem to be unnaturally optimistic, and do not seem to understand what someone in a valley in their lives might be feeling.

Then there are the ones that act like the mountain belongs to them-, as if they did something to deserve their ticket to the top.

What about those that never make it to the mountain top with Jesus? Are they less spiritual, less connected, less chosen?

I don’t think so. You see, there is something about this stark contrast between the base and the summit that strikes close to home for me. My sisters and my mother were in a near fatal car accident in 2016.

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My sister Marena was in an accident that changed the life of my family. I was in the literal mountains while having one of the deepest valley experiences of my life. I received the news that my two sisters and my mother was in a near fatal car accident the day before I was about to start an 8-day backpacking trip through the Tetons in Wyoming with my husband, and four of our dear friends. I had to decide if I was going to hit the trail or fly to California. My sister and my mother urged us to go on our trip, the one we had been planning for the last year. My compromise was praying my way through the Tetons, each day, asking God to heal my sister’s brain injury and bring her back to us.

Praying through the Tetons with the Robinson family was one of the most moving spiritual practices. As we hiked, we prayed. Mile after mile, I found myself

I was in the mountains, asking God to save my sister’s life. I was not stuck below, waiting for a miracle like the father in this story, but I sure felt like it.

My sister’s healing is nothing short of a miracle. She is back in school, training to be a nurse. The people that saved her life inspired her to change careers.

As we close, I want you to turn to someone besides you, and tell them where you are. Are you in a valley? Are you on a mountain? Are you basking in God’s goodness or are you waiting for God to show up? Take 5 minutes and talk with your partner.