



THE GLORY OF GOD

February 23, 2020, Transfiguration of the Lord

Exodus 24:12-18; Matthew 17:1-9

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Well, it has been a steep climb up this mountain, hasn't it? Perhaps it should be known as "the Great Interim of 2018-2020." 'Great,' not in the sense of "All Glory, Laud and Honor," but the other way that term is used...like "The Great Depression of the 1930s; The Great Recession of 2008; the Great War of 1914-1918... It has been a steep climb up this mountain, I know.

Moses and Aaron and Joshua and three guys named Nadab, Abihu and Hur, and 70 elders climbed Mount Sinai. They encountered smoke, fire and thunder. Peter, James and John also climbed a high mountain with Jesus. There they encountered a dazzling brightness of clothes and cloud, an unexpected vision and voice that knocked them to their knees in fear.

On the way up our high mountain, we encountered months of major construction and a flood of near-biblical proportion just as the last piece of new flooring was laid. We faced a major restructuring of the budget and offered up our communal lament. Very early in our climb, we had to keep our footing as the shifting of generational tectonic plates were felt: Carol Ann Mercer passed the torch in the Women's Association after 30 years to Shannon Froehlich; one Pastor Emeritus, Dr. Anderson, died and a new Pastor Emeritus was named, the Reverend Lindvall; Lydia Spinelli retired and Amy Warden became the first new Director of the Brick Church School in 37 years; and Ellsworth G. Stanton III died, leaving the positions of Clerk and Beadle empty for the first time in 28 years. Fran Laserson stood in the breach first and now Mario Verdolini and Debbie Seraphim have joined ranks as Clerk and Assistant Clerk. Christopher Allen took on Beadle duties and is now so comfortable in that role that, last Sunday in the Narthex, we saw Christopher snap



his fingers sharply in what I imagine was true “Ellsworthian” style, sending a lagging lector scurrying into place for the processional!

We’ve come a long way, Baby, and no, you’re not at the top of the mountain yet, but I think you can almost see it from here. So, keep going. Keep on going. Support each other along the way, as you have been doing so well. As the Scriptures today bear witness, it is along the rugged way and upon the high mountain that the Glory of God is especially present to us.

Today it is worth noting the references to time in Exodus 24: The passage begins with an oblique reference to time: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there...’” That word, “wait,” of course, implies time. Moses did not know how long the wait would be. Some verses later, we learn that the wait was six, then seven days. That’s how long Moses was covered in a cloud on that mountain; the cloud of God’s glory. Not until the seventh day did God speak. The 7th day indicates in the Bible a kind of completeness. So, on the 7th day, when God felt the time of waiting was complete, had reached its wholeness, then and only then did God speak. I suspect six days of silence in thick fog seemed like a lifetime to Moses...but oh, when the glory of God does speak...well, it is worth all of the waiting indeed. Then those six or seven days become forty days and forty nights altogether, another good biblical phrase meaning...well, a long time. The glory of God, it seems, has its own timetable that does not always match our own.

So, good people of The Brick Church, you are waiting. But your waiting is not idle time. God is present and at work on your behalf right now and in the time ahead. Your part of the covenant relationship with God is to be faithful, alert, listening, prayerful, patient and expectant; confident that God will fulfill your waiting when the time has reached its wholeness. The glory of God is the final completion of every story, and proclaiming the glory of God is our collective call.

This story from Exodus 24 echoes through the centuries and then settles on another high mountain in Matthew 17. Here, Moses is seemingly transported from Mount Sinai to this place with Elijah. Matthew says they are talking with Jesus. We are



not privy to the conversation. But since Jesus has just foretold his own suffering and death, perhaps Moses and Elijah have come to encourage him, to bear visible witness to the disciples that Jesus is the Messiah of God. In him is found the dazzling brightness of the glory of God.

Peter likes to get the first word in at every opportunity. He immediately speaks up and offers to build three booths in case these three greats of Israel want to take up permanent residence in that rarified air. But he is silenced soon enough as a cloud, this time a bright cloud, overshadows them. God's glory shines in Jesus as God exclaims, "This is my beloved son. Listen to him!" Peter and James and John know glory when they see it. They fall down in such fear that Jesus has to help them up. "Do not be afraid," he says. "Get up. Keep going. Keep on going." Then Jesus leads them down the mountain...back to daily work...to ordinary life...amidst regular people. He returns them to the every day responsibilities and joys and dangers and heartaches of life. And yes, he knows, it will also take them toward Jerusalem's extraordinary danger with its greatest heartache of all.

There are mountaintop moments in our faith but as we know, most of faith is lived at ground level...where you can only see so far ahead and the terrain often changes. Yet by putting one foot in front of the other, you can get where God is leading you, transition after transition along the way.

On a September Sunday in 2018, we dedicated the oil portrait of Michael Lindvall. That morning, I was standing at the rear chancel door, as is my custom, with our own version of Peter, James and John—or the OSP crew known as Nate, Lex and Michael. On this grand day for the church, one of them asked if there would be an oil portrait of me when I left. "Oh, no," I said... "I am just a transitional senior pastor—oil portraits are reserved for your permanent senior ministers." Nate didn't miss a beat. He looked at me and said, "Well, aren't *all* pastors transitional really?" It was a funny moment, to be sure, but also thoughtful and theological. Pastors do come and in your history they stay for a long time; yet, in a sense, even installed "permanent" pastors are transitional in a way. They lead you in their time into a new era and season of ministry and mission as pastor and congregation together



discern over time where God is leading you for the present opportunities and challenges.

Peter wanted to build three booths, or paint three oil portraits, and remain there in a kind of stasis forever, permanently cushioned in the bright cloud of God's glory. Up above the fray below as the permanent address where God's people, God's church, resides. But that is not, of course, how God or God's Son rolls. Moses and the elders had to go back down, keep walking together toward the land God was giving them. And Jesus led his disciples then, and leads you today, too, forward. Leading you, as the next passages in Matthew show, to minister in places where diseases still hold sway and tax disputes erupt, and people prefer to measure their own greatness by the size of someone else's sin. It is a way that cannot bypass the cross, but always ends in resurrection and abundant life.

This story featuring the glory of God is always assigned to the last Sunday before the season of Lent begins. It is a glimpse of God's brightness as the days take on a purple hue and the hymns are tuned to minor keys. Waiting these forty days and forty nights to come, this moment on the mountain stays with us until the glory of God flashes again in a place we least expect it—the tomb. So, we keep going. We keep going.

I have kept on my desk for two years some drawings and notes children in this congregation gave me as I started my transitional ministry here. One child wrote this:

Dear Rev. Clayton,

I think that you will do great as a pastor...your kindness radiates around the room, putting everyone in a good mood. I'm still gonna miss our old pastor, but I think you'll be able to fill his shoes. Sincerely....

I know that over the past two years, I did not always put all of you in a good mood! Yet your kindness, in fact, radiated nonetheless. You never asked me to fill shoes



that were not mine, and instead let me walk in shoes that fit me as we climbed and descended and walked along together.

When one my friends and fellow faculty members at Columbia Seminary retired, and we gathered outside his classroom door as he finished his last lecture to applaud and send him off, Dr. David Bartlett looked at his students and colleagues and said what was both simple and profound: “In the end, it is all thanks.”

That is how I feel—filled with thanksgiving.

May the glory of God light your way, now and forever. Amen.