

Title: Really Seeing

Date: February 25 & 26, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Isaiah 2:1-4](#)

Text: [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



When was the last time you played “don’t tell?” As a pastor, I have a lot of “don’t tell” experiences. I get pulled into the confidence of a church member, usually with something exciting to share. “Don’t tell anyone, but we are engaged to get married.” I’ve had the conversation twice in the

last few months. “Don’t tell anyone but we are pregnant.” I had that conversation Friday. “Don’t tell anyone but I’m getting a big promotion.” Don’t tell is about delaying an announcement to a future time, a time when something special and wonderful will happen.

We find ourselves on top of a mountain today and the story ends with “don’t tell.” We are part of a select group. Maybe you don’t sense this when you read the Bible. But you should. You have a privileged viewpoint. In this case, Jesus selects three disciples, Peter, James and John and leads them to the top of the mountain and like making a point of view documentary, we go with them. You get to see what is going on while the other nine disciples, stay at the bottom of the mountain. They weren’t selected to have this mountain top experience.

Mountains are important in scripture as places where you can really see. On Mount Moriah Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Isaac and was able to really see what his relationship with God was going to be with God when Isaac was spared with the gift of a ram as alternative sacrifice. Moses receives the commandments on top of Mount Sinai and his countenance was transfigured and so brilliant that he had to wear a veil for the rest of his life. Elijah hides in a cave on Mount Carmel, burned out from his victory over Ahab and Jezebel’s prophets. There he really sees who God is when God comes to him in a still small voice. Mountains became synonymous with inspiration and vision so Isaiah says, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the

Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." (Isaiah 2:3b)

It's not surprising then that mountains are important in Jesus' story. Matthew tells us that when Jesus was tempted to worship the devil in exchange for all the kingdoms of the world, it happened on a mountain. When Jesus preaches his most powerful sermon, he does on the side of a mountain. Jesus went to the mountain to pray. And today we have this story of the transfiguration, which happened on a mountain.

This climb comes at an important time, strategically placed smack in the middle of Jesus' ministry. Or more specifically, at the midpoint situated between Jesus' baptism at the beginning and his resurrection at the end. The major purpose of the mountaintop experience is to help the disciples (and us as witnesses) remember the one and help them to see what is coming.

According to Matthew's halftime report, Jesus' ministry is not faring well. Despite the initial start and the large crowds, things have headed south. Jesus has been labeled a blasphemer, accused of demon possession, rejected by his hometown to the point that he stopped doing ministry there, resisted by the very people he came to serve and save, and is the subject of murder plots that will, of course, finally be successful.¹ What initially looked like a win for the Jesus team now was no sure thing. Peter had boldly predicted that Jesus was the Messiah, in the mold of King David. Now, with the storm clouds gathering, it was hard to see where things were headed.

Just when the mounting failure of Jesus' ministry threatens to cloud their vision with doubt, Jesus takes Peter, James and John and they climb Mount Tabor. The purpose was to expand their vision, to help them really see. Once they arrive at the top, Jesus "...was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him." (Matthew 17: 2-3)

Peter's response is not unlike our response when we have mountaintop experiences. Someone told me about skiing on their Christmas vacation. "At the top of the snowy mountain, it was so beautiful and glorious, I just didn't want to ski down the hill. I just wanted to capture the moment." Rangers say there is a hypnotic effect at the rim of the Grand Canyon. People can literally be frozen by the view. Last summer, on top of the highest wooden observation in the world, the

Pyramidenkogel in Carinthia, Austria, people were so mesmerized that they had trouble getting people to leave.

This is Peter's response. Seeing Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah, he thinks, "We're set. I was right. I know Jesus was going to be the king of Jewish people." He wants to capture the moment and stay right there. This makes more sense when you know that Mount Tabor is strategically located between the north/south and east/west travel routes and was used by Barak and an army of 10,000 to defeat Sisera and the Canaanites. Peter's response to build three dwellings is clear. He is planting a flag right there on the mountain. He's rebuilding David's kingdom from Mount Tabor.

Because we are there, witnessing through the Word what is happening, we know there is much more going on. Before Peter can finish his plan, a voice from heaven interrupts him saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Suddenly, Peter, James and John see and hear something that they've not experienced the past three years. They fall to the ground with fear. Jesus, ever the caring friend "...touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone." (Matthew 17: 7b-8)

Have you had that moment when you see someone very differently? Parents often experience this when a child appears differently to them, almost overnight. A baby suddenly becomes a toddler, a teen who appears like a child one moment and in the next moment like an adult. Students coming home from college after their first semester and suddenly appear much more mature. There are other moments in life when we are awe struck by the achievement or heroism of someone who we previously believed to be ordinary. We think, "I never saw him that way. I never believed he had that capacity. I didn't think he could do that."

For a moment the disciples see a very different Jesus. Just when the mounting failure of Jesus' ministry threatens to cloud their vision with doubt, the curtains part for an instant, and they see and hear who Jesus truly is. "This is my Son," the heavenly voice reveals, "my beloved child, the one with whom I am well-pleased. He was my beloved Son at his baptism; he is still my beloved Son in the teeth of human rejection; and he will be my beloved Son in glory."

The story of the transfiguration is about a way of seeing, really seeing who Jesus is even as the circumstances of his life and ministry

threaten to obscure his identity. This mountaintop moment is saying, "Don't be misled by the pain and rejection of the present. In spite of appearances to the contrary, Jesus is the cherished Son of God. He was in his baptism and will be when he shines in the glory of his resurrection."

But this story is more than just a story about the experience of the disciples really seeing Jesus. We are invited along as witnesses so that we can use this way of seeing with ourselves and others. For lack of a better title, let's call this truth "transfiguration seeing."

"Transfiguration seeing" would have a vision about people not in their present circumstances but in the light of the past and future, their beginning and their end, their baptism and resurrection. What a difference it would make if we could see one another not in the light of our flaws and imperfections, but as people who were created and blessed as children of God and with God's good grace as heirs of the kingdom.

Let me give you an example of this way of seeing. In order to become a minister in most denominations, a ministerial candidate must be examined and tested theologically. The church has a right and an obligation to know if a person is theologically sound before authorizing ordination. Every minister on staff went through an ordination council. I heard recently about an old retired minister who sat on many ordination councils. He asks the same theological question of every potential minister for year after year. He begins by asking the candidate to look out the window. The puzzled examinee peers out the window, and the old minister adds, "Tell me when you see a person out there."

"I see one," the candidate will haltingly announce. "Do you know that person personally?" "No, sir." "Good. Now, my question is this: Will you please describe that person theologically?"

In decades of experience in asking that question, the seasoned minister has found that the candidates tend to give one of two different answers. Some will say something like, "That person is a sinner in need of the redemption of Jesus Christ." Others, however, will respond, "Whether they know it or not, that person is a child of God, loved and upheld by the grace of God in Jesus Christ."

"I suppose," this minister reflects, "that, technically, both of these answers are theologically correct. But it is my experience that those who give the second answer make the better ministers."²

Do you hear within this story “transfiguration seeing.” Those who answer the second way have the ability to see people beyond the present circumstances. They can see them at the beginning and end, as a beloved child at the moment of creation and blessed member in God’s future. They are a beloved child of God.

If I were to ask you to look around the room and do an inventory of the people you are worshipping with, the way we often do it is to describe one another in the present circumstances. There is a man struggling to keep his dignity while facing financial challenges. Here is a woman whose marriage is failing because of fidelity issues. There a woman who continues to abuse her body with alcohol. Here is a man who is a bully and cannot control his anger. There and there and here are those who are slowly losing memory in old age; here and here and there are those who are fighting health challenges that threaten their very life. In some cases, we see with judgmental eyes; in other case, we see with pity. This is circumstantial seeing.

The transfiguration invites us to see one another differently. Transfiguration seeing views everyone here, appearances to the contrary as beloved children of God, named sons and daughter in baptism and assured a place of glory in God’s kingdom.

I don’t know about you, but seeing people in that light makes a huge difference in my relationship with them. It works really well when dealing with difficult people. And it makes a huge difference in my own esteem. I am not what all of this is. I’m not my failures or even my successes. I am rather, who I was in the beginning and who I will be with in the end, a child of God with a future with God. You might give this a try, this way of seeing. It is what we are invited to do in this mountain top lesson about really seeing.

The story ends in an odd way. As they are coming down the mountain, Jesus says, “Don’t tell anyone.” Don’t tell anyone? That doesn’t make any sense it, does it?

Hold on. When we say, “Don’t tell anyone” it is about delaying an announcement to a future time, a time when something special and wonderful will happen.

Oh right. Don’t tell anyone because something special and wonderful is going to happen, to Jesus and....to you and me.

¹ Too Soon, Monsieurs, Too Soon? CSS Publishing Company, WHISPERING THE LYRICS, by Thomas Long.

² Long