



The Highs and Lows – Touchpoint for February 15, 2023

Matthew 17:1-9 (MSG) *Six days later, three of them saw that glory. Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain. His appearance changed from the inside out, right before their eyes. Sunlight poured from his face. His clothes were filled with light. Then they realized that Moses and Elijah were also there in deep conversation with him.*

Peter broke in, “Master, this is a great moment! What would you think if I built three memorials here on the mountain—one for you, one for Moses, one for Elijah?”

While he was going on like this, babbling, a light-radiant cloud enveloped them, and sounding from deep in the cloud a voice: “This is my Son, marked by my love, focus of my delight. Listen to him.”

When the disciples heard it, they fell flat on their faces, scared to death. But Jesus came over and touched them. “Don’t be afraid.” When they opened their eyes and looked around all they saw was Jesus, only Jesus.

Coming down the mountain, Jesus swore them to secrecy. “Don’t breathe a word of what you’ve seen. After the Son of Man is raised from the dead, you are free to talk.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“Six days later ... Jesus took Peter and the brothers, James and John, and led them up a high mountain.”

Six days later.

Six days later from what? Six days later after what?

One of the issues with breaking up the biblical story in little snippets and reading them is that we can lose sight of the forest for the trees. We hear and read passages in isolation from their surroundings and can think these verses are all there is, or are the whole story. And we may miss the larger picture.

Fortunately, I don't think that is the case in this instance, but I do think what has just happened earlier can shed some light on this passage of the transfiguration.

The verses preceding this passage concern the confession of Peter as Jesus being “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And then following that, Peter rebuking Jesus for saying he must suffer and die, and then Jesus saying to Peter, “Get thee behind me Satan.”

This is what preceded the transfiguration story six days earlier.

Now by tying the transfiguration to that event six days earlier, I can only take this to mean that Matthew wanted to somehow connect this transfiguration story with that story.

As I look at these two stories, I can't help but think they are in many ways the same story. Just told in two different ways. And Peter, unfortunately, misses the point in both the stories.

In the first story, Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah. In the second story, Jesus is surrounded by Moses and Elijah – a sure sign of Jesus as the Holy one. And a few moments later, a declaration by God that this is his beloved Son.

In the first story, Peter misses the point of what it means to be the Messiah, and in the second story he does as well. He's not allowed to build a monument.

Now I can't really fault Peter. I mean, he gets some critical stuff right. And you know when he is seeing Jesus being lit up like the sun and standing with Moses and Elijah, you know Peter is thinking, "Nailed it with my confession! Now this is what I'm talking about, Jesus. This is stuff worthy of the Messiah."

And I can't really blame Peter for wanting to build a monument to this moment. I mean, when I get something right, I sure as heck wish I could build a monument for all to see.

In fact, I can remember when my boys were teenagers, and one day at the end of a "discussion" (and you can hear the word argument), my one son said, "OK Dad, you are right."

Well you can bet that stopped the discussion, right there. I went and got a piece of paper and wrote on it: "On this day, at this spot, Dad was declared right." And I taped that piece of paper to the living room wall at the exact spot. There was going to be a monument created to that moment.

Funny thing is, I don't think that paper stayed up very long.

I can't really blame Peter for wanting to build a monument to his moment. I mean, when I get something right, I sure as heck wish I could build a monument for all to see.

But that is just the point as to why Peter, and I, get it wrong so much of the time.

I live to be right; Jesus lives to be alive.

Let me explain. I once had a professor who said, "Most people would rather be right than alive." And what he meant by that, is most people live for the sake of trying to justify themselves and their actions and beliefs, rather than simply being involved in the stuff of life. With all of its highs and lows, joys and sorrows.

Richard Rohr put it this way, "Most people would rather be correct than connected."

But for Jesus, life isn't about being right or correct. Life is about being involved in life. With all of its highs and lows, joys and sorrows.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and your neighbor as yourself."

There's not much in that verse about being right. And I don't know if there could be.

I mean, I have talked to more than a few people who have been married or had friendships that have lasted decades... 40, 50, 60 years... And when asked to explain how they managed to stay together or as friends all those years, never once have I heard, "Well... at the end of the day, we sat down and tried to figure out who was more right."

In fact, more often than not I heard the opposite: “At the end of the day, we just tried to figure out how to make this work in the best way possible for both of us.”

I think I've finally come to the conclusion that trying to be right, prove you're right, and build a monument to your rightness probably isn't the best foundation upon which to build a loving relationship.

I know, it took me 66 years to come to that conclusion. I guess it should be clear by now, I'm not the swiftest horse in the race.

Love involves being there. In the good and the bad, the high and the low. In life and death.

When Jesus was born, he was to be called “Immanuel,” which means ‘God with us.’ He wasn't to be called whatever the Greek word is for, ‘God's right, and you're not. So get to work.’

Immanuel... God with us. In all of the highs and lows, joys and sorrows.

This is why it naturally follows for the Messiah to suffer and die. This is why there cannot be a monument or a dwelling for Jesus to stay on the mountain. And why you can't speak of the Christ until after you've seen him hanging on a cross.

If God is with us, then God is with us in life and death.

If God is with us, then God is with us on the mountaintops and in the valleys.

And that is good news.

Because I can make it through those mountaintop experiences pretty easily. And if God needs to spend a little more attention on one of you lost sheep, well... “I'll be just fine God, feel free to go on your merry way.”

But when I am one of those lost sheep, or when the valley of the shadow of death is darker and more foreboding, I need more than a mountaintop God. I need more than a messiah that finds glory in shining light.

I need a messiah of the valley. I need a messiah that expresses his glory by entering into the suffering and darkness of the world, and in particular... my world.

I spent an evening a few months ago with my boys. They are now in their 30s. After a couple of relaxing refreshments, we started talking about the old days.

And I started bringing up all the things they used to say and how I had now been proven right. I was starting to feel kind of good about myself. I was thinking it was time to build another monument.

That was... until one of my sons said, “Uh, Dad, I don't know how to say this, but I wouldn't put being ‘right’ on the top of the list of what made you a good dad. That really wasn't your strong point.”

I was silent for a moment, not sure what was to come next, and then I simply asked, “Oh yeah? What should I put at the top?”

And he replied, "You were there. You were just there."

At first I wasn't sure whether to feel good about that or not. But as I reflect more, I think I could have done a lot worse.

Now my point of that story is not to say, "Look at me," or hold me up as an example. My point is to say that what most people are looking for in life is connection, not correction. They're looking for love, not law. A relationship, not rules. On one level that is the easiest thing to do, and on another level, that is the most difficult. To just be with someone. Not fix them, not solve them, not correct them. Simply be with them.

It can be so hard and uncomfortable to do.

And yet that is what Jesus has done with us here in this meal. What I find so fascinating about this meal is that Jesus doesn't try to fix, solve, or correct any of the disciples this evening. He simply tells them to do what they need to do.

And by giving himself to them in the bread and the wine, he promises to be with them even in their betrayal, denial and cowardice.

I can only imagine that later on in their lives, the disciples saw this evening as a mountaintop experience, even though it took place in the darkest valley of the shadow of death.

And maybe that's how it should be. Jesus, God with us, in the good and the bad. The mountaintops and the valleys, in life and in death.

Jesus, taking our valley experiences and making them a mountaintop. Taking our mountaintops and moving us into the valley.

So that wherever we are, we will know God is with us.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be Still, know that I am God

Lamb of God

(Salt of the Sound)

Lamb of God, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God (hear our prayer),

Lamb of God, Grant us peace (hear us pray).

This we pray.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come O Lord and Set Us Free

(John L. Bell, The Wild Goose Collection)

Come, O Lord and set us free. Give/Bring your people peace.

Come, O Lord and set us free. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

1. And take our guilt away. Give us your pardon Lord.

2. Free from our self-obsession. Free from each fond possession.

3. Free to affirm each other...as sister and as brother

Reshape the world you made. Let what your hand created...be always celebrated.

The Meal

Our Father

(Taize Reflections)

Benediction

May God Keep and Bless You

(Marty Haugen)

May God keep and bless you, and nothing distress you.

May God guard and guide you and friends walk beside you.

May God's arms surround you and fear not confound you.

May God's light shine through you and night not subdue you.

As you sleep and wake may your prayers arise as love songs for God,

Whose love never dies, whose love never dies.