

Coming Down the Mountain

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
Service of Ordination for Sarah Walker Cleaveland
February 15, 2015
Mark 9:2-9

How grateful and delighted I am, and we are, for this day. Worship on any Sunday at Third Church is a celebration, but to toss an ordination in the mix raises the celebration bar. And when the ordination is of a child of this congregation, whose family remains so deeply connected, well, what can I say. We extend an especially warm welcome to family members and friends who have travelled to be here with us this day. We welcome as well members and friends within the Presbytery of Genesee Valley. This service is, in fact, a service of the presbytery, with the ordination commission acting on behalf of the presbytery as a whole.

On a personal level, I am grateful both for the opportunity to preach, and to serve as the moderator's designee this morning as our presbytery moderator, Brandi Wooten, ministers at her home church in Chili.

As Sarah and I discussed this day over a slew of phone calls and emails, we discussed what scripture texts to claim. We landed on the lectionary texts for the day, which are the texts for Transfiguration Sunday. I hope to make a connection, an important connection, in fact, between transfiguration and baptism and ordination and our common call to serve. If I do – thank Sarah. If I don't – blame me. In a spirit of gratitude for all that is and anticipation for all that will be, let us pray.

We remember, O God of memory and hope. We remember three students killed in Chapel Hill, and now a shooting in Denmark, and we pray for an increase of tolerance and a decrease of senseless gun violence. We remember Kayla Mueller, and we pray for an end to warfare everywhere and for all hostages and those who hold them captive. We remember Andrew Primerano, and we pray for his circle of family and friends who continue to mourn his death and cling to good memory. O God of memory and hope, bless all who mourn, all who seek peace, all who seek healing. And bless us now as again we engage your word, filled with the very promise of memory and hope. Silence in us any voice but your own, and transform us with your good news. For Christ's sake we pray. Amen.

There is so much going on in this story, much of which feels mysterious to us. I will focus on a slice of it but don't want to ignore the totality of it. Jesus takes three disciples off by themselves. He is

transfigured – his appearance literally changes, his face, his clothing. Elijah and Moses appear with him, and they speak with one another. What is going on is ripe with layers of meaning.

Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock write that “Both (Elijah and Moses) were prophetic figures who had worked miracles, had opposed the power structures of this world, had suffered for their faith and commitment, and had been vindicated by God.” (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, page 146-147)

All of it – the tradition, the prophetic impulse, the habits and cultures and practices of the faith, the connection to the divine, come together in Jesus. And all of it – what Elijah and Moses represent, what it means for who Jesus is and what his mission is becoming, are huge topics, huge. They have merit when we are considering ordination – about what it means to follow Jesus as a leader called and equipped to be prophetic, to serve this one whose own service took such human form, to speak God’s word in the church and the world, and to do so within the context of communal norms and values.

Peter, the rock, feels a need to speak up. Teacher, this is really great. Let’s build three little buildings for the three of you. Mark’s editorial comment sums it up – “he really didn’t know what to say.” Which means that because he didn’t know what to say, but felt compelled to speak, he said something entirely ridiculous. We’ve all done that. Three buildings, a suggestion that clearly misses the point.

A cloud overshadows them and a voice booms out. Earlier, when John *baptized* Jesus, the voice identified Jesus as God’s Son, and declared how pleased God is. In this moment, the identity shifts from the Son of God to the Son of Man, from divinity to humanity, followed by a command to the audience – “listen to him.” Remember that...listen to him.

Then in an instant it’s all gone – clouds, voice, Elijah and Moses – all gone. Just Jesus and the three. And they went *down* the mountain, instructed by Jesus to keep everything a quiet secret, and back to whatever normalcy those three following years with him would offer.

With the mysterious appearances, the cloud, the booming voice, there is plenty to ponder. Beverly Gaventa writes that “What the disciples (and Mark’s audience) need to understand is that Jesus is both the Son of God, powerful agent of healing and subject of dazzling glory, and the Son of Man, who will be betrayed and persecuted and crucified...Over and over,” Gaventa writes, “Mark lifts up both aspects of Jesus’ identity, relentlessly recalling that the suffering will yield to triumph, but that the triumph cannot be had without the price of the cross.” (*Texts for Preaching, Year B*, pages 179-181)

Sarah is signing on for duty with *that* Jesus, and no other. Really, though, that’s true for all of us.

Baptism will feature prominently in our ordination liturgy. And because transfiguration echoes Jesus' baptism, it foreshadows ours, with the sacred rhythm of death and new life, death and new life.

I'd like to linger a bit longer on the rather mundane, seeming offhand comment, "as they were coming down the mountain." It seems like an insignificant stage direction to get from what happened to Jesus' command for secrecy. It becomes a *significant* stage direction, not only for those present at that moment, but all of us, as a summation of what happens in baptism and ordination, of what happens in life.

Coming down the mountain. Back in the day, before Sarah or I or any of us went to seminary, the cliché was that sermons would have three points and a poem. The cynical takes on that cliché became something like three poems and a point, or three points and a joke. The reality is that sometimes we are grateful for one point, one good point, and if we can remember "coming down the mountain" this morning, that would be good, with two implications to that one point. *Who* it was that was coming down the mountain, and *what* they were called to do once they came down, the ordinariness of the people and the ordinariness of the tasks.

In the gospels, Jesus repeatedly calls ordinary followers out of ordinary life. He doesn't ask for credentials, makes them take no litmus test, pass no ordination exam. He simply calls them, surprisingly, unexpectedly, which qualifies them right there.

Even so, time and time again, the disciples don't get it. They say the wrong thing; they do the wrong thing; they misinterpret Jesus' words or actions. Jesus doesn't fire them. He doesn't look for others. The ones he takes up the mountain he brings down the mountain and he sticks with them, even when they don't stick with him.

Sarah, take heart. And take heart on behalf of all of us. Trust your gifts and trust your call, but also know you stand in a *very* long tradition of *very* human followers, beginning with the very first ones, who will not always get it, and who will demonstrate their humanity time after time.

Annie Dillard writes: "There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth...there is no one but us. There never has been."

That means that Jesus calls flawed, ordinary types, we who come down the mountain with him, not in spite of who we are, but because of who we are. In a chapter in *Secrets in the Dark* titled “The Church,” Frederick Buechner writes, “Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixture in them of cowardice and guts, intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any one of us. The reason he made his church out of human beings is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact,” Buechner writes, “as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It’s a point worth remembering.”

So might we remember *that* as we remember the ministry to which we are called? For *it* will be ordinary and flawed as well. I often joke with couples preparing to be married that they would be well served by investing exponentially more time and energy and money in the day *after* the wedding than the day of.

Simply put, mountaintop experiences are not sustainable. Nor should they be. Families love vacations, but real family life is developed in day-to-day routines. Athletes love big games, but what you hear great athletes say when they retire is that it’s the practice they miss the most. The essence of Sarah’s ministry will not be captured in this ordination moment, but in what comes next, in every ordinary, quotidian moment to follow. Jesus does not stay on the mountain; he comes down the mountain, and he brings his followers with him, so that he, and they, can mix it up in everyday life, not in the dazzle and glory of transfiguration, but in the rough and tumble, flesh and blood of incarnation.

Nanette Sawyer, who serves a small church just south of where Sarah serves, writes that “(Peter) doesn’t know how to respond to a mystical mountaintop experience...Mountaintop experiences,” Nanette writes, “can be exhilarating. But there is something to be said for the consistency of a balanced daily life filled with remembrance of the holy.” (*Christian Century*, February 5, 2015, page 18)

That is exactly what this ministry is about. It is about what happens when we ordinary people come down from the mountain to engage the ordinary work to which we are called.

In this Academy Award season, one thing I remember about the movie *Selma* is how much time King and his team spent in meetings. Meetings! Every moment spent on the Edmund Pettus Bridge reflected hours and hours of meetings, planning, small talk, endless cups of coffee.

The first church I served, again, just south of where Sarah serves, was very small. This morning's choir would have outnumbered the congregation on any given Sunday. So I typed and photocopied the bulletin. I shoveled snow. I lit the pilot light when it went out (an action that might have led to a premature building campaign, not to mention a premature search for a new pastor!). I made the coffee on Sunday mornings. Not being a coffee drinker, people would ask me how I made such good coffee. I followed the recipe on the can, I would say. I did all those things and loved them, because they are the stuff of life and the stuff of ministry.

Daily, routine, quotidian things. The ordinary as the holy. When a parent is late picking a kid up from youth group, and you spend 10 minutes in one-on-one conversation. When you drive to a meeting with a church member and learn more about their life than you ever had before. When you sit down and eat pancakes and sausage with someone. When you get off-task and simply talk about life, and God.

Kathleen Norris writes that "The Bible is full of evidence that God's attention is indeed fixed on the little things. (This is) simply because God loves us--loves us so much that the divine presence is revealed even in the meaningless workings of daily life." (*The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work*)

Ordinary people doing ordinary work, made holy by the God who claims us and calls us.

Sarah, every blessing to you on this most excellent day. You will continue to be in our prayers as your ministry commences. We are proud of you and grateful for you. Remember your baptism and listen to Jesus, and all will be well. Yet I've got to tell you that as awesome as a day this day is, the real adventure will begin tomorrow, when you come down the mountain. Count on it. That goes for the rest of us, too. Amen.