

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

The View at the Top

Matthew 17:1-9

Last Sunday we enjoyed a wonderful worship service. Many people have commented on it. The entire service was uplifting. Some have jokingly asked me how I was going to top it. That's a nice compliment. And it would be nice to know something like that was going to happen every Sunday. However, as I thought about that, I began to wonder if that might have been what Peter had in mind when he asked about building those dwellings for Moses, Elijah and Jesus. Spiritual high points are wonderful. We treasure memories of them. It would be nice to have another spiritual high that tops all previous ones. But in my experience such peak experiences don't work that way.

I'm guessing that many of you have some moment or moments in your life that you would like to hang on to. Births, baptisms, weddings, family gatherings, personal spiritual high points, all those are candidates for preservation. Photos provide a window on the event, a portal, so to speak, that invites us to remember that event in a special way. But I think you'll agree with me, that as nice as the photo is, it never quite measures up to the reality of the moment. Matter of fact, it never quite fits the memories we have either. Have you ever looked at a photo and thought, that's not the way I remember it?

One day Jesus took Peter, James and John apart from the rest of the disciples. Took them up a mountain to a place far removed from the every day run of the mill. What happened there was remarkable, so remarkable that it has been the subject of much speculation and questioning. To be quite blunt, what happened there is beyond our comprehension, way outside our experience. There on that mountaintop Peter, James and John saw Jesus revealed in all his glory as no one else ever saw him. And they were stunned by what they saw. They were so overwhelmed, so moved by what they saw, that Peter tried to preserve the memory in a particular way, at least that's the way I understand his question about the three dwelling places. In other words, if he'd had a camera, he'd have snapped a picture.

Now imagine that we had a picture of the Transfiguration. What do you think we would see? Would we catch sight of Jesus, Moses and Elijah speaking with each other? If so, would it be a clear image or just a blur, kind of like that image of a man on mars that made the rounds a couple of weeks ago. And if we could make them out, would we know which one was Jesus, and which was Moses? I suspect we could identify Elijah. You don't see many garments of haircloth with leather belts these days. Then again, maybe the brightness of Christ's glory would have overpowered the film so that we couldn't see anything but a white frame. Or perhaps the cloud would have obscured the whole scene as if we had taken a picture of the fog. Whatever the case, a photo wouldn't have preserved the voice, and it was the voice that drove the disciples to their knees. "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Nope, a photo of the Transfiguration wouldn't do us much good. Nor would an audio recording of that voice. Something there is about God that can't be captured on tape or film or any other medium. Which is why, I think, we must rely on stories such as this. Some things are best left to the imagination or memory. And even if your memory is only partially accurate, take a moment

to imagine a face shining so bright that you had to turn your eyes away. Take a moment to listen for a voice that simply knocks you off your feet. Then listen for another voice, a friendlier voice, the voice of one who calls us to be his disciples, teaches us a holy way, encourages us in our service and walks alongside us day by day.

Do not be afraid, he says. Just moments ago he was transfigured before them. Now he says don't be afraid. Now he looks as he always did and acts as if nothing really happened. Don't be afraid, he says, and everybody assumes it was the voice that scared them out of their wits. I agree. Just as a loud clap of thunder nearby frightens us nearly out of our skins, so that voice of God might frighten us if we heard it as they did. But there's something else they may have been afraid of, something more subtle. After you've seen and heard what few ever see and hear, what will do next? After you've been to the top, how will you live your life after you come down?

Don't be afraid, Jesus says. Then he takes them by the hand and leads them down the mountain. We know what awaits him at the end of that journey. We know the challenges before him and us, the rather mundane challenges by comparison to that marvelous view from the top. It's back to the real world, as we are fond of saying. And the real world is anything but that marvelous view of the top. The real world is an epileptic child just down the road. The real world is a cross in Jerusalem hungering for blood. The real world is presidential politics, war in Iraq and Afghanistan, AIDS epidemic, and genocide in Darfur. The real world is anything but the glory of God shining in the face of his beloved Son. The challenge before us is this, shall we remain on our knees worshiping an awesome God. Or shall we put aside our fear of all that stuff, come down off the mountaintop and get involved?

I think you know the answer. We're here today because those disciples trusted Jesus, got up and went with him down that mountain. We're here because Jesus healed that epileptic boy and traveled on to Jerusalem to meet that bloodthirsty cross. We're here because he shared a meal with his disciples on the night he was betrayed, a memory that we are about to relive. Do not be afraid. Take this bread. Drink this cup. And remember.