Sermon Luke 9:28-36

Transfiguration Sunday

March 2nd, 2025

One of the most prolific contemporary hymn writers is Marty Haugen. Have you heard of him? You probably have sung some of his hymns – there are a few in the Chalice Hymnal we’re using, like ‘Gather us in’ (‘Here in this place, the new light is shining, shadows of doubt are vanished away…’), and ‘Healer if our ev’ry ill’.

Now Haugen also composed a couple of biblical performance pieces – modern oratorios, if you will. One is called, ‘The Song of Mark’\*, and in it there is a piece about the Bible lesson we heard today, the Transfiguration story - which, by the way, we find in Mark, Matthew and Luke. And this piece about the Transfiguration Haugen wrote is quite tongue-in-cheek. Here we have the disciples who join Jesus up the mountain, Peter, James, and John, and they are in awe of what they are witnessing: Jesus, transfigured before their eyes, shining brightly, and then they also see those prophets of the past, Moses and Elijah. And so they break out in song, Broadway style - they sing a ditty called, ‘So good to be here’. And this is how it goes:

‘It’s so nice on the mountain of Tabor,

No crosses to bear, no worries and care,

And so peaceful to rest from our labor -

It’s so good to be here with Jesus.’

And the three disciples go on why it is so wonderful to be up on the mountaintop. ‘From up here, the Romans look tiny. From up here, all our problems seem small.’ And they sing about how inspiring it is to be up there, surrounded by all this greatness, and wouldn’t it be nice to just set up camp and retire right there and now.

‘It’s so nice on the mountain of Tabor,

No people in need with faces to feed.

When you’ve had it to here with your neighbor,

It’s so good to be here with Jesus.’

I think this song, in a humorous way, captures the spirit of this whole episode. And I find it very relatable: that the disciples revel in this moment, this mountaintop experience, far removed from all the worries of what’s going on down there in the valley – to the point that Peter wants to set up camp there, on this holy ground, and make this moment of fleeting beauty and awe permanent.

I find it very tempting, especially in these times, to just tune out, to retreat from what’s going on around us and in this world, and climb into some sort of spiritual ivory tower. Let me tell you, there are plenty of moments these days when I’ve ‘had it to here with my neighbor’ – and I’m not talking about you, but folks I totally disagree with, people I am tempted to hate – people whom God still calls my neighbors who deserve love and respect. Really, God? Making a commitment to Jesus, following Jesus is challenging – and during the upcoming Lenten season, which leads us to the cross, we will be reminded of that.

Peter, James, and John, reveling in the moment up there on the mountaintop, have to realize that as well. So here they are in awe, enraptured by this moment of bliss, high on the whole experience – and then, suddenly, a dark cloud overshadows them. This understandably frightens them – anyone who’s ever hiked in the mountains knows that dark clouds are bad, since they usually bring a storm that can be dangerous since, up there on the mountaintop, you’re quite exposed to the elements.

But then, of course, this cloud also has a symbolic meaning. Something dark is brewing. And, in fact, the transfiguration happens at a pivotal point of Jesus’ ministry: from this moment on, Jesus doesn’t meander in the Galilean countryside anymore, healing people and bringing them a word of hope; no, from now on, he is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. Soon, he will announce to his followers that he has to suffer and die. Peter, James, and John don’t know this yet as they are on the mountaintop – but they have a frightening sense of foreboding.

The voice that booms from the cloud doesn’t make it better: ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’ Listen to him. It’s not about your desires and great ideas – it’s about Jesus, the Christ, and his – more often than not challenging - message.

Now I sometimes wonder if Jesus was frightened by this episode as well. We will hear about Jesus’ temptation by Satan in the wilderness next Sunday – and chronologically, the temptation happens way before the transfiguration story. But here it is again – temptation. In this case the temptation to stay on the mountaintop in the glorious presence of Moses and Elijah, and build some dwellings there, as Peter suggests – not coincidentally, Jesus calls Peter ‘Satan’ in a different story. Peter is well-meaning, but just doesn’t get what Jesus’ ministry is all about.

There is the temptation for Jesus to forgo the suffering and death that awaits him down there in the valley. There is the temptation to revel in his divinity and forgo his humanity. But the voice from the cloud reminds him as well what he came for: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, restore the sight of the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of God’s favor. And that can only happen down in the valley, where life, in all its messiness, is happening. As the voice booms from the cloud, Jesus is ripped out of his trance – the moment of glory passes.

Jesus knows he has to come down that mountain – and Peter, James, and John know they have to listen to him and follow him, wherever the way leads.

In Marty Haugen’s ‘Song of Mark’, Jesus speaks to his friends after the glorious moment on the mountaintop has passed, and now in a much more somber tone:

‘We must walk down the mountain to the path down below,
there is no time to linger, you have so far to go,
though the way may be weary and your spirits be low,
walk on, walk on into the valley.

Now the sky turns to midnight in the valley below,
Soon the storm will be breaking and the fierce winds will blow,
through the dark and the lightning lies the way you must go
walk on, walk on into the valley.

From the peace of the mountain to the trials down below,
you are called now to labor, be the seeds God will sow,
bring new hope, bring true healing to that world of woe,
walk on, walk on into the valley.’

Walk on, walk on, into the valley. This is not only Jesus’ message for Peter, James, and John, but for his followers throughout time, which means for us here as well. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just ignore the dark clouds that are hanging over us right now - all the unpleasant, scary, and threatening stuff that’s happening in this country and around the world? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could separate our ‘spiritual life’ from ‘real life’? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could stay in our little bubble here in this church, on this mountaintop, on this piece of holy ground, to be nourished and fed and feel blissful, reveling in the glory of Christ? I for one would love that!

But, alas, we can’t stay here forever. As the kids have figured out, you CAN’T stay on the mountaintop forever. Life can’t be sustained up there, at least no human life. Life happens in the valley – life in all its beauty, and in all its messiness and sometimes ugliness, with all its complications and annoyances, and with its moments of love and marvel and wonder. God’s Spirit permeates everything – and everywhere we go is holy ground. And we are called to deal with whatever is happening wherever we go, with faith, hope and love. That’s challenging for sure. But Christ promises to be with us.

At the end of the song, ‘So good to be here’, Marty Haugen has Jesus say to his followers:

‘When you must face tomorrow, with all its pain and sorrow,
my love shall burn within you so your hearts will know the way.’

May it be so. Amen.

\*The Song of Mark by Marty Haugen
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