

February 26, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 17:1–9

TITLE: Moral Authority

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. ⁴Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' ⁵While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!' ⁶When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. ⁷But Jesus came and touched them, saying, 'Get up and do not be afraid.' ⁸And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.

Six days prior to our passage today, Jesus inquired of his disciples, "who do people say that the Son of Man is?" To which they replied: "some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." And Jesus then asked: "But who do you say that I am?" And Simon Peter, under the anointing of the Holy Spirit answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Six days after Peter's divine revelation, Jesus takes Peter, James and John and they ascend a high mountain and while there, Jesus is transfigured, he is transformed into something they had never witnessed before. Jesus' face begins to shine, reminiscent of Moses' when he ascended the Mount to commune with God and receive the covenantal Decalogue. Jesus' clothes became dazzling white, and suddenly Moses and Elijah appear on the mountainside talking with Jesus. Yet again, God confirms in an undeniable way, exactly who Jesus is right before the three disciples' eyes.

Peter was so overwhelmed, he blurted out, "If you wish, I will make three tents, three dwelling places here, one for each of you." Some say Peter's desire was to stay on the mountaintop in the presence of the transformed Jesus, Moses and Elijah for a while. But before Peter could finish speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them and out of the cloud, the voice of God proclaimed: "This is my son, the beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!"

Listen to him, were God's instructions to the disciples and dare I say, listen to him are God's instructions to us today.

I've spent an inordinate amount of time lately listening to newscasters, pundits and reporters, as they report on everything that is going on in this country. The ever growing number of executive orders, Russian spying and manipulation of the presidential election, immigrants, refugees and foreigners being deported, people illegally detained at airports and taken into custody by ICE, murders being perpetuated on people deemed as other, the roll back of civil rights for the LGBTQ and other communities of color, legislators in hiding and not being responsive to their constituency. The list is ever

growing. My soul has grown weary and I'm ready for a mountain-top experience. I'm ready to retreat to a place where it is just me and Jesus alone; a place where I can unplug, tune out, unwind and be oblivious to what is happening in our country and the world.

And then God speaks into the weariness, "Listen to him!" Now when the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground, overcome with fear. The scriptures tell us that the fear or reverence of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom. The disciples knew beyond any doubt they were in the presence of the Lord and so they fell silent, there was nothing more to say, they humbled themselves, laid prostrate and worshipped God. And Emmanuel, God with us reached out laid his hand on them saying: "Get up, you have nothing to fear." When they looked up, Moses and Elijah were gone and Jesus was there alone.

Recently, I heard someone say, there is a difference between formal authority and moral authority; and then the person made it crystal clear by stating; Although, President Trump did not win the popular vote, he did win the Electoral College, fair and square. Therefore, he is the president of the United States of America. We must accept that he has formal authority. However, he does not have moral authority, as he has not conducted himself in such a way thus far, that the majority of the American people consider him qualified for the presidency.

Jesus leads the three disciples down the mountain side and instructs them to tell no one what they have witnessed, until he has been raised from the dead. "Listen to him," he is and has moral authority. Not because he lives in a gilded castle or dines in fine restaurants, not because he flies in a private jet or hobnobs with the rich and famous, not because he has been elected to be the leader of the free world. But, exactly the opposite, the author of the Gospel of Matthew shared, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matt 8:20). Listen to him, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him" (Matt. 28:18).

After the moment of transformation on the mountainside, Jesus led the three back down to the valley, for their work was among the people. People needed to be healed, cared and provided for; people needed an encouraging word, people needed to be restored back to family; people needed to be welcomed and accepted part of the community. Brothers and sisters, mountain top experiences prepare, embolden and empower us for the work in the valley.

One commentator, Maryetta Madeline Anschutz states:

"God prepares people in the transcendent encounters of our lives to endure the world below, the world of the cross, the world that has the ability to break us and yet is never beyond God's redemption. These encounters happen on mountaintops with a blinding light for some. For most, they happen in ordinary moments of our classrooms, boardrooms, and soup kitchens, any place where we make space for the Holy to be present."

And I might add, any place and any time we make space to listen to the Beloved, the one who has all authority and power, the one who leads and guides us through the valleys, the one who in spite of his lowly state from a worldly perspective, is King of Kings and Lord of Lords; the one who led his disciples to a mountaintop experience to prepare them to hold on when they descend into the crushing realities of the world below.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said:

“...the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around.... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding. Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee -- the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."....We mean business now and we are determined to gain our rightful place in God's world. And that's all this whole thing is about. We aren't engaged in any negative protest and in any negative arguments with anybody. We are saying that we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people.... We are saying that we are God's children....It means that we've got to stay together.... and maintain unity. The issue is injustice....Now, we've got to keep attention on that...we're going to march again, and we've got to march again, in order to put the issue where it is supposed to be.... And we've got to say to the nation: We know how it's coming out. For when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory.”

Dr. King's words are as relevant and true today as they were April 3, 1968.

Wendell Berry, poet and former US Laureate offers this prayer:

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.*

Beloved, retreat to the mountain, but don't linger or stay up there too long. While there, feel the presence and the touch of the Lord, and then come down for there's much work to do. We have been commissioned and have the moral authority and responsibility to be repairers of the breach, to march for peace, access, equality and justice and by faith to stand for righteousness.

Amen.