

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
February 19, 2023
Transfiguration Sunday
Matthew 17:1-13

*Holy Spirit, heart of life and breath of love—
let your truth live in us,
let your beauty shine in us,
and let your goodness grow in us;
through Jesus Christ, beloved of God. Amen.*

“Moral Courage”

Last summer, following my son Tommy’s graduation from the University of Denver, we headed further west to Rocky Mountain National Park for a family vacation. As I’ve gotten older I’ve come to love and respect our national parks; they are truly awe-inspiring, and Rocky Mountain is no exception. One day my husband Terry and I decided to do some exploring on our own and drive Trail Ridge Road, the road that connects one side of the park to the other. This is not an easy drive. Trail Ridge Road is the highest continuous paved road in the United States. It’s appropriately known as the “Highway to the Sky,” because it crosses the Continental Divide at a whopping 12,183 feet. And the drive from one end of the park to the other takes a couple of hours, which doesn’t include stops along the way. You’re advised to set aside at least half a day to really experience everything the road offers.

And the changes that occur en route are fascinating to observe. A drive that may begin in forests of aspen and ponderosa pine soon enters thick subalpine forests of fir and spruce. And when you reach the tree-line, (eleven miles of the 48-mile road is above the tree line) the last stunted, wind-battered trees yield to the alpine tundra.

Up on that windswept alpine world, conditions resemble those found in the Canadian or Alaskan Arctic. It’s normally windy and at least 20 to 30 degrees colder at the top of the mountain than it is at the bottom. The vistas, best enjoyed from one of several marked road pullovers, are extravagant, sweeping

north to Wyoming, east across the Front Range cities and Great Plains, and south and west into the heart of the Rockies.

What they don't tell you before setting off, is that the drive up is very narrow at parts, and if you're not on the side of the road that hugs the mountain, it's frightening. Sometimes there's no guardrail between your car and the edge of the mountain. As Terry drove I found myself in a perpetual state of leaning my body towards the mountain wall, as if that could have prevented us from falling off his side. By the time we reached the visitor's center at the top I couldn't wait to get out of the car where there was more than 3 feet between me and the edge.

But of course what goes up . . . must come down.

If you paid attention to the story from Matthew that we heard earlier, you may have noticed that Jesus calls the disciples to follow him down the mountain and go into the world. This is the story of Jesus' transfiguration and we traditionally hear it on the Sunday before Lent begins. In the story Jesus climbs the mountain with Peter, James and John and then right before their eyes he transfigures; he becomes a dazzling white figure and his face shines like the sun. At this, suddenly Moses and Elijah appear and begin talking with Jesus. This is when Peter makes the suggestion to them to build 3 tents – one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, so they can stay on the mountaintop. "It's good for us to be here!" Peter exclaims. But the Lord will have none of that, so out of the clouds comes God's booming voice, "Listen to him!" And with that Peter, James and John throw themselves on the ground, cowering in fear.

Now I want to pause here to defend the disciples. Because honestly, who can blame them for wanting to stay on the mountaintop. We all need mountaintop experiences. We need those sacred moments when God's presence is felt most profoundly. We need those vacations that take us away, those times spent with friends and family filled with laughter and reminiscing. We need those ah-ha moments when everything is crystal clear and life is sure and we know we're on the right track. So I don't blame the disciples at all for wanting to stay there. Hunkering down and retreating to what is good and familiar, or just plain old safe, is natural. And so very human.

But what goes up must . . . come down. And not only that . . . sometimes on the mountaintop God can also challenge us. Sometimes God can also challenge us.

The disciples were challenged on that mountaintop. This is why Jesus tells them not to be afraid: don't be afraid of the authorities that are going to push back on our work. Don't be afraid of the cross that waits. Don't be afraid of the hostility you'll encounter.

"Sometimes I feel discouraged and think my work's in vain," says the old spiritual. There are moments when the question arises, "What was I thinking?" The disciples had to have been thinking it. What was I thinking when I agreed to sign on to this work of justice and reconciliation that Jesus keeps talking about. It's a hostile world; people aren't always nice. Is it any wonder they were overcome by fear? But encounters with the presence and purpose of God can do that to a person! After all, if God is at the wheel, well . . . watch out. You might not be driving on the side of the road that hugs the mountain. And that takes courage.

I've been thinking about courage lately – in particular the moral courage Jesus calls us to embody – ever since reading an op-ed in the Journal Gazette by Rachel Tobin-Smith. Some of you probably know Rachel. She wrote not long after the video of the beating of Tyre Nichols came to light. Like so many of us, Rachel wondered why someone didn't step in to stop the beating. She called on readers to have moral courage.

I happened to read the op-ed while attending an anti-racism conference – a conference at which the call to have moral courage was loud and clear. Our conference leaders also posed difficult questions, like why don't we dig deeper in this work? Are we working to be anti-racist, or are we just trying to be good white people? Are we willing to engage in work that is messy and complicated?

Not long after that conference I attended a training event on how to work with congregations where there has been sexual misconduct because I'm a new member of the presbytery's sexual misconduct response team. We talked a lot in our training about the systems that allow this misconduct to take place or allow it to keep happening or just sweep it under the rug. My takeaway from the training is that misconduct is allowed to continue, or be ignored or swept under the rug,

because systems benefit from that behavior. People in power benefit; persons of privilege benefit; and so do the organizations of which they are a member.

So it takes courage to speak up; because when we speak up we risk losing power or control and that frightens us.

Rushworth Kidder says in his book “Moral Courage” that in order to be morally courageous, you have to acknowledge three factors about yourself. You have to have principles you really value, and be perceptive enough to apply them and prioritize them in often-confusing real-life conditions. You have to recognize the risks as well as the consequences of action and inaction. And you have to have strength of character to take risky actions to follow your principles.

Someone else once said, “Moral courage is doing what is right even when we are afraid.”

Friends, moral courage is what Jesus calls us to embody. And on that mountaintop when the disciples saw Jesus change right in front of their very own eyes, the disciples understood that business as usual was no longer an option. The transfiguration signaled that a new day was on the way, and that God is about the business of bringing hope and healing to a broken world. After all, when your eyes are opened to God’s good fortune, then you cannot go back to the way things have always been done. However, you can go back down the path to be a healing presence to those who are hurting, to work for justice and peace, and to offer hope.

And this is a wonderful metaphor for the church. Because as much as we may want to remain on the mountaintop, there is work to be done out on the plain. There are people who need to be healed. There are injustices that need to be brought to light. Our calling as Christians, as church members, is to go down the mountain and be in ministry with other people, and support them in their time of need. Someone once said that good religion ought to call you out of yourself for a while and redirect your focus, your attention, from yourself, your needs, and your feelings, to something much greater. And that a faithful disciple, and a faithful church, is concerned about Christ’s mission of standing with the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, nurturing the children, welcoming the excluded, and living its life for the sake of others.

I believe whole-heartedly that our call to follow Christ means we are called to love and to serve. We are called to love all of God's people-which doesn't mean we need to like all of God's people, but it does mean we'll treat everyone fairly; and, as a follow-up to that, we are called to serve all of God's people, especially the people with whom Jesus really identified.

After staying a while at the Visitor's Center, Terry and I got back into the car to go back down the mountain. And in an ironic turn of events, because we started in Grand Lake but ended in Estes Park, we had to retrace our steps to get back home, which meant another trip up and down; because going around the mountain would have taken all day, and we didn't have all day.

I'd like to tell you it was a little easier the second time, but I'm not so sure of that. However, we did know what to expect, and that helped us to summon the courage we needed.

Likewise, the more we embody the moral courage Jesus calls us to have, the better we get at flexing those muscles. The good news in all of this is that we don't go down the mountain alone; or back up, or back down, as the case may be. Jesus went with Peter, James and John and he goes with us, too. He even volunteers to sit on the scary side of the car so we can hug the mountain. And he gives us the all courage we need.

Amen.