

“And We’ve Been Told – How Shall We Respond”

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February 19, 2012

Mark 9:2-9 ²Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, ³and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. ⁴And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. ⁵Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” ⁶He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. ⁷Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” ⁸Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Well, I’m just back from my twice a year “close-to-torture for me” sitting as an “interviewer” (not inquisitor) on the Board of Ordained Ministry Theology and Doctrine committee. Our candidates were appearing before us for approval for ordination in the UMC. After 4 years of college, plus 3-4 years of seminary and 2 years of the practice of ministry in their first appointment, the candidates came before 3 committees. One group explored their call to the ministry, their physical, emotional, relational and spiritual health. Another their preaching and teaching and the one I’m on, their understanding of theology and doctrine. As you can imagine it is a grueling time for all and for the committee I’m on entails reading 700-800 pages of theological essays. If someone needs work in an area, a couple of us have to take them to a room and let them know they were deferred, for another year. That is one of the most painful things I ever have to do. On the other hand, against the backdrop of long hours, marked by some rather mundane interviews and the pain of informing folks they need remedial work, there are always some bright, shining stars... “Rare finds” our board calls them. We are always blessed with at least one or two of these each time we meet. This year was no exception. Our shining star this year was a young woman named Elaine. She is originally from Charlotte and did her undergraduate work at Davidson and seminary at Yale Divinity School. Though she is barely 5 feet tall she spoke with a giant assurance and passion born of wanting others to discover the same adventure of following Christ she experiences. She leaned across the interview table and said, “Not to sound simplistic” (This young woman couldn’t sound simplistic if she tried!) “Not to sound simplistic, but what the church needs to be about, is to truly follow Jesus and do what He says to do. So often,” she continued, “The church substitutes merely showing up at worship occasionally and hearing something sweet an hour per week, if you want, if that makes you feel all right for true discipleship. Following Jesus has become something private for so many and that won’t engage, attract or interest another person, to also truly follow Jesus and do what He says to do, unless we do it ourselves.”

I pray she keeps that focus, passion and intensity all the days of her ministry and life; to truly follow Jesus and do what He says to do.

I fear she's right. I fear that often we've whittled down and tamed Jesus to the extent that we're comfortable and cozy with Him in shrunken state and know what to expect from Him and around Him; but it doesn't have to be that way for He will lead us, if we only muster the mustard seed of faith to respond.

The disciples had followed through some exciting times. They'd been with Him as He healed many, fed thousands, walked on water and easily handled conflicts with the authorities. About a week before today's story, all the positive happenings and progress came to a screeching halt. Peter had properly called Jesus the Christ, the Messiah. It was then that following Jesus pivoted from all the glorious, wondrous events. Jesus began talking of His own suffering and death, even naming Peter a satanic agent if He opposed such a course.

It looks like following Jesus and doing what He wants isn't so easy after all. So our passage says Jesus led Peter, James and John up on a high mountain.

After all that death and suffering talk, the seaside dwelling fishermen might well have felt death and suffering were coming now, looming ahead in the form of a mountain! Mountains were places they assiduously avoided. Mountains were where children were sacrificed to the false god, Molech. Moses came down from a mountain not only with the law but with a face that had to be shrouded from glowing or maybe even with horns! Mountains were frightening and in their following Jesus that day, they could see a mountain looming before them. **It seems that if one is to follow Jesus, it means following Him not only from the joyous delight of a crowd receiving free bread and fish, to frightening mountains.**

Some Biblical scholars speculate it was a particular mountain; they went to that day, that is Mount Hermon, which stands 9200 feet tall.

Once, in my early 30's I climbed from sea level to the caldera of a 4000 plus foot volcano. In those days I was young, fit and athletic. It was physically one of the hardest things I ever did and one of our party wound up in the hospital the next day from the exhaustion. I simply can't imagine climbing more than double that height, but that could have been what Jesus led Peter, James and John in doing.

It seems this following of Jesus and doing what He says isn't so easy and tame, as we make it out to be, doesn't it?

The disciple's anticipation of spiritual power being exhibited on mountaintops soon proved true. Before their eyes Jesus' in person and clothing, mysterious to them and us, began to reveal the beautiful radiance of the Divine, of God. Then, the disciples saw Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus. How they knew who they were, we'll never know, but they did know them, even without name tags. There before them, stood the Prophet, the Lawgiver and God in Jesus.

Peter the impetuous man of action was reduced in fear to blathering: "Jesus it's so good you have some workers here, like us, to build some dwellings for you, Moses and Elijah."

What kind of dwelling could Peter have built for Moses and Elijah, two of three Hebrew heroes (along with Enoch) that dwelt with God,

not having to suffer death? More, what could he have built for the Messiah? We can be pretty sure there was no Lowe's on that particular mountain! What could he possibly do? A pile of rocks here, some sticks lashed together there, making a lean to? How precarious a position Peter seems to be in, at that moment! Why, he is in the presence of the lawgiver, the prophet and the King of Kings and he's babbling on and willing to lash sticks together! Why it almost seems like a blithely un-aware church member, sitting in the Presence of the King of Kings, offering the gift of a 5 dollar bill and complaining about the second song not meeting their needs!

But in our story Jesus doesn't reply to Peter's offer. Instead a cloud descends. A descending cloud was a sure sign of the very Presence of God for the Hebrew people.

And sure enough, God spoke out of the cloud with words close to those from the baptism of Jesus. You see, at the baptism God spoke to Jesus, "you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). Now God speaks to those who would follow His Son, perhaps as answer to those who would babble and make a lashed together stick lean to like offering fitting only for a tamed, acceptable messiah, God said: "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to Him." Which, knowing who Jesus is, means also to obey Him.

And just like that, it was over. The Hebrew heroes gone, the cloud dissipated, the echo of the divine voice faded away; it was just the followers and Jesus. And Jesus spoke to them and they listened. He told them to tell no one what they had seen until after the Resurrection; which would, we know, follow great suffering and agonizing death. His course was to not be a narrative of glory on the mount and the glory of being raised. Suffering and glory were to be wed together. How wild, how untamed, how uncomfortable Jesus is! How much more soothing it would be to move from the radiant glory of the transfiguration to the glory of the resurrection! But the fact is as surely as Jesus faced the betrayal, trials, suffering and death, prior to being raised from the dead, so too, must we move through Lent, to Good Friday before arriving at Easter.

And despite the words of smiling TV preachers who claim following Him is all blessing and positive and health and wealth and joy, following Him in reality is daring, frightening and cross bearing.

Following Him is only possible for us human weaklings because He is with us. Following Him takes us from the comfort zones of our lives, into shadowy places of death so that true life may happen. Following Him is a life of dying to self and selfishness to be raised anew in His image. Following Him means allowing Him to heal us of our mundane sameness and being transfigured ourselves into those who reflect the one who walked and talked, suffered, died and rose again so that we may do the same. May God give us the wisdom, the courage and the faith to listen to the Son and do what He says to do? "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14). The only question remaining is, how shall we respond?

Let us pray.