

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

27 "For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. 28 Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

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

-Updated New Revised Standard Version

Whenever Lent starts in February, it feels like we're racing from cradle to cross with Jesus. We get a few stories of Jesus' early ministry and teaching; we hear of his early relationship with the disciples and then things get very heavy, very quickly. Then again, Jesus' ministry wasn't that long, just a handful of years. Maybe our race through it helps remind us of the intense pace of this world changing incarnation.

I wonder exactly how long it was before Jesus started preparing his disciples for the fact that he was going to suffer and die. I know that fairly early on, check out chapter 10 of Matthew, he prepared them for the fact that following him was going to result in suffering, conflict, and struggle for them. But maybe they thought they could bear that so long as they still had him with them. But that this amazing teacher, healer, friend might meet a brutal end? That would have been hard to absorb. Where we picked up reading today gives us just one of many examples of Jesus preparing his disciples for the hard road ahead.

If we go back to verse 13 in chapter 16 we see Jesus and his disciples musing about the true identity of Jesus. And Peter gets it right- he knows who Jesus is- the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the one for whom the world has been waiting. And once it is clear that the disciples have his identity straight, Jesus begins immediately to prepare them for his suffering and death and resurrection. And once again it is Peter's voice we hear in response to this. He is unwilling to accept that the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, would have to endure such suffering and he challenges Jesus on this, only to be rebuked by Jesus and called a nasty name. Jesus went on to continue to offer hard teachings about the suffering that would result from following him as well as the suffering that he himself would experience. At the beginning of chapter 17, we hear "Six days later..." As far as I can tell, Jesus spent six days trying to convey these difficult teachings to his disciples.

Can you imagine six days of being told that the teacher that you love is going to suffer and die a terrible death? Can you imagine six days of being told that to follow this teacher means to suffer as well? Can you imagine how hard those six days must have been? Even though Jesus was teaching that he would be resurrected, that didn't mean anything to his disciples because resurrection was a completely foreign concept. And they likely couldn't understand why this powerful, loving man would have to endure suffering BEFORE glory.

By the time Jesus led his first three disciples up a high mountain I'm sure they were mentally and spiritually exhausted. Jesus had been trying to lead them up a mental mountain all week, after all. One could interpret Jesus' invitation up the mountain as an opportunity for these three to get some quality time with Jesus and some fresh air and exercise to clear their minds. But, I think the trip up the mountain was a part of the lesson. Sometimes when words can't reach us, actions can. I'm thinking of the old movie the Karate Kid where Daniel's teacher teaches him the most important lessons of karate by having him complete apparently mundane tasks that made no sense to him. Wax On, Wax Off! Paint the Fence! Sometimes though, our bodies can learn lessons

that our minds resist. So after six days of talking about struggle, Jesus lets the disciples live struggle, by leading them up a HIGH mountain.

I imagine they walked quietly, that their breathing became increasingly labored as they walked, that sweat dripped down and muscles grew fatigued. I imagine their brains would have been cycling through everything Jesus said and as they made the arduous trip up the mountain, I wonder if they started to understand. I wonder if they started to make their peace with the suffering that would inevitably be a part of the continuing journey.

Only to then be completely surprised by what they saw at the mountain top. Wham! The transformation that occurs there comes out of nowhere. One minute they're climbing a mountain, and the next minute their leader undergoes an extreme makeover- face bright as the sun, clothes a dazzling white. And as if this were not shocking enough, two legends of Jewish faith, long since departed, show up and start talking with him. How they knew it was Moses and Elijah up there with him, considering they had never seen photographs, and we aren't told that any introductions were made, we don't know. But apparently they knew. Maybe when you know someone's story inside and out as all faithful Jews know the stories of Moses and Elijah inside and out, maybe you can just tell it is them, even if you have never seen them before. This was a completely unexpected experience, utterly shocking.

The way that Peter responds is often interpreted harshly, as one more example of how clueless Peter can be. Many often assume he was saying that they should stay permanently on the mountaintop in this glory, thereby evidencing once more that he does not accept that suffering has to be a part of Jesus' story but... I feel a bit of sympathy for Peter and I interpret his actions with a bit more grace. I think that maybe by the time Peter reached the mountaintop and was struggling to catch his breath and was rubbing his weary muscles, I think maybe he had gotten the message. He knew that struggle and suffering would have to be a part of the journey. And when he saw Jesus so wondrously glorified, he felt deeply how good this was. He didn't say, "It would be good for us to STAY here." He said, "It is good for us to BE here." Right now, in this moment,

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this is good... let us relish it. And when he offers, quite politely actually, to build three dwellings if Jesus wished him to do so, the word for "dwelling" does not suggest a permanent shelter, but rather a temporary shelter- like a tent. I don't think that Peter thought anymore that the suffering could be avoided, but I do think that he continued to wish that with all his heart.

How many of us wish we could freeze time at the glorious moments in our loved ones lives? When our child gets a standing ovation after a stellar performance or scores the winning goal in the tournament or when our spouse is showered with accolades upon retiring or our parents are granted awards after a lifetime of faithful service, don't we wish that those moments would linger a bit longer? Don't we try to make them last by going out for celebratory meals, by taking lots of pictures and creating scrapbooks or albums, and by cultivating our ability to tell the stories to allow these moments to be revisited again and again.

We know that we cannot keep those whom we love from suffering, but that doesn't stop us from wishing for it, for wishing with all our might. And it doesn't take away the longing in the moments of glory to see those moments expand.

Many say that this story of the transfiguration, this experience of a vision in which Jesus becomes temporarily glorified, is a foretaste of the resurrection. There was no way for the disciples to get their heads around resurrection and so, perhaps, they were granted this vision to help to prepare them. Perhaps the six days of teaching and the climb up the high mountain were preparing them for the events of Jesus' last week, when ultimately he'd carry his own cross up a hill only to be nailed upon it and left to die, and so the vision at the mountain top was the experiential teaching they needed to get them ready for what would come three days later. Jesus is an excellent teacher, no? Teaching with words and actions. Appealing to different learning styles- perhaps Peter, James, and John were kinesthetic or visual, rather than auditory learners.

The event though, at mountaintop that brought the disciples to their knees, trembling in fear, was when God appeared as God had done in days of old, in a cloud, and spoke out of that cloud, declaring Jesus to be God's beloved son, with whom God is well

pleased, and ordering the disciples to LISTEN to him. Jesus is glorified not just on the mountaintop, but all the time. Jesus is always the beloved one of God, showering God's people with wisdom if only we will listen. Even when Jesus is saying things that are hard to understand, even when Jesus is saying things that are hard to accept, they are gifts from God, the words from Jesus are gifts from God.

We enter into the season of Lent this Wednesday. I pray that many of you, indeed that all of you, will come here on Wednesday evening for the Ash Wednesday communion service in the chapel at 7 pm (unless we get snowed out!). I am praying that you will take the six weeks ahead of us to seek to draw closer to Jesus, to encounter Jesus, to listen to Jesus. You may do this by reading one Gospel a week. Or reading one Gospel slowly throughout the whole season, perhaps even our focal Gospel of Matthew. You may do this by using the devotional we're providing to you on a daily basis. But maybe you're not one who learns so much by reading. Maybe evening prayer on zoom at 6 on Wednesdays starting on March 1 will be helpful for you. Or maybe you'll want to climb a mountain or take on some other equivalently arduous task which will help you to reflect on all that Jesus endured on our behalf. Some people make sacrifices in Lent; perhaps this is an experiential way to draw closer to the one who made such a tremendous sacrifice for us.

I urge you to take your spiritual journey, and in particular your relationship with Jesus, seriously in the six weeks that follows, hopefully participating in as many of the holy week services as you possibly can as these lead you into deep reflection on Jesus' suffering and death, so that when Easter rolls around, on April 9th, you will be on your knees in awe and gratitude as you realize the life transforming brilliance of the good news of this day. If you listen to Jesus, listen carefully to this beloved son of God, even when he is saying things that are hard for you to hear, I trust that you will have a deeper experience of the radical gift that is Easter.