

Head in the Clouds

a sermon based on

Matthew 17:1-9

and delivered on

February 23, 2020

Transfiguration Sunday (Year A)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2020 Rev. Mark A Harkness

“He needs to get his head out of the clouds?” Have you ever heard that expression? Has anyone ever told you to get your head out of the clouds? I don’t know that I have. I remember football coaches telling me to get my head out of my... but that’s not the same. Is it? Get your head out of the clouds. What does that mean? Why should we?

Mainly, it’s because it’s impractical. Right? People with their heads in the clouds aren’t being realistic; and that’s important. It is important to be realistic. It is important to be practical; but is that enough.

Peter, James, and John, the three whom Jesus invited up that mountain where they would literally find their heads in the clouds when the cloud of the Lord’s glory covered that mountain, they were practical. They’d experienced reality.

Each of these three had been a fisherman. James and John were actually fixing their nets (a very practical exercise) when Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (Mk 1:17) Peter was with his brother Andrew casting his net into the water when Jesus appeared on the shore and said the same thing, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” (Mt 4:18-19) I don’t think Jesus picked these guys out of the blue. Each of the disciples had been longing after God. But they were practical. Mostly. They left their jobs to follow him.

Then they experienced reality in another way. They got to see the vitriol that people would heap on Jesus – this extremely holy man. They were with him when, in the synagogue, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed that the Scripture was fulfilled. They would have seen the crowd (his hometown crowd, nonetheless) tried to throw him off a cliff at the edge of town, because of that.

They’d been with Jesus when he noticed the hungry crowds, and said let’s send them to town to get food. Then when Peter’s brother Andrew pointed to the boy with the five barley loaves and two fish, they nodded in agreement when he said, “But what are they among so many people?” (Jn 6:9) Having witnessed Jesus feed 4000 others later; they considered their practical failure in not having enough bread when Jesus warned them about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They only grasped that Jesus was giving them a deeper lesson, when he told them explicitly. (Mt 16:6-12)

And now six days after Jesus asked the disciples what people thought of him, and asked them they thought he was, and Peter blurted out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” (Mt 16:13-16) - now, only six days after Jesus told began to tell them that he would suffer and die in Jerusalem only to be raised three days later – now, only six days after Peter revolts and says, “No,” (Because “That’s just not how Roman will be overcome. It’s not practical.”) just six days after getting the hard practical lesson that each disciple would be expected to take up his cross and would have his life on the line, this is when Jesus takes these three up ta mountain for some alone time.

While they were there, Jesus was transfigured before their eyes. “His face shone like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white.” (Mt 17:2) Moses and Elijah were there. Moses who’d had his own mountaintop experiences, first when he saw that flaming bush, and then again when that holy cloud covered the mountain and God spoke to him with the Law. Moses who’s face too would glow each time so that he had to put on a veil after each time that he went into the tabernacle and the cloud would engulf it.

Rightly, they are overwhelmed and Peter once again – in Mark’s telling, because he did not know what to say, having been terrified – Peter once again blurts something out, “Let’s make three booths, one each for you, Moses, and Elijah.” (Mk 9:5-6)

Then it happens. A cloud overshadows them, and they hear the voice of God speaking, “This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!” Then it stopped. Moses and Elijah were gone. There was Jesus just as they were used to seeing him. We don’t really know, though, how long they hung out on that mountain. We get the impression that they headed down as soon as it was over. But the Bible doesn’t really say that. It’s just that the next thing we hear is about their trip down

the mountain. Because of that so many sermons on the Transfiguration point out that mountaintop experiences are meant to send us into the valleys where we can be of practical use. Don't stay there with your head in the clouds. We forget that Moses was up on that mountain surrounded by the cloud of the Lord's glory for so long that people started to doubt and they decided to build an idol to lead them back into Egypt. Is this a warning that we need to move away from mountaintop experiences? I don't think so.

Let's go back to these three guys. Jesus told them to keep it to themselves... until. But think about it. Of all the disciples who stayed close when he was arrested? Yes, Peter denied knowing him three times, but he only got the opportunity because he was lurking nearby. John was there at the foot of the cross comforting Mary, Jesus' mother.

When the women came and told the disciples that his tomb was empty, who came running? Peter and John – two of these guys who'd been on that mountain. Often we presume they go running in disbelief, but they'd witnessed the transfiguration and they got it, that Jesus was more than a son of God like each of us is a child of God, but they'd seen that he was literally God incarnate – and ran down because they knew it was the truth.

Even though they had been consumed with grief, that mountaintop experience sustained them. During that time between Easter and Pentecost when they went back to practical things like fishing, they were always looking for Jesus. And it allowed them to see him.

Rather than being so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good, their mountaintop mindset prepared them to be useful. Without a vision of what will be or can be, the tedium of practical projects is draining. Who starts a project and puts in all the work without a vision of what will be? When complications arise, what sustains us? Our hope in the completed project. Right? But what if that completed project seems like a stretch in the first place? Then what happens? Complications lead to doubts; doubts drain enthusiasm; and a lack of enthusiasm abandons hope.

Mountaintop experiences those moments of joy in our lives when we can't find words grand enough to express what we're experiencing except maybe to say like Peter, "This is good," are what shape us and make triumph possible. Holding on to the mountaintop – getting our heads back in the clouds – energizes us like remembering the joy of holding a newborn in your arms keeps you from strangling that teenager years later. The hopes that are imparted in those moments give us the confidence and energy we need to be useful.

Take time for the clouds. Enjoy and revisit those moments that gave you joy. I suspect that at various times in their ministries when they doubted themselves, that Peter, James and John, went back up that mountain or maybe another, just to remind themselves of what it was that God had done.

That's the joy of worship. Each week, we are invited to go back up the mountain to put our heads in the clouds to surround ourselves with the extravagance of music and the beauty of stained glass not because it's practical, but because it is what we need to claim the fullness of life or to be useful. Get your head INTO the clouds, if only for now. AMEN.