

“Building Booths”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Transfiguration of the Lord
February 23, 2020

Old Testament Reading: Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.” ¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, “Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.” ¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day, he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

New Testament Reading: Matthew 17:1-9

¹Six 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. ⁹As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, “Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.”



Sermon: “Building Booths”

The story of the transfiguration is one of those interesting Bible stories that can be hard to wrap your head around. In it Jesus’ identity is confirmed, but there are some odd things happening that make us want to stop and look; to try and wrap our heads around what is going on. Jesus goes on a hike with Peter, James, and John, and when they reach the top of a nearby mountain, things start happening:

Jesus begins to glow.

Moses and Elijah appear.

The voice of God sounds.

Peter decides to build booths.

Now I’m not sure how I would have reacted to Jesus becoming all shiny glow-y and the sudden appearance of two of Israel’s greatest prophets, but I’m pretty sure an impromptu construction project would not be it. In today’s world, Peter would’ve probably jumped on Facebook and started live-streaming the encounter. Or he might’ve posed for a selfie with Jesus, Moses, and Elijah in the background. Or he might have just run over and asked for an autograph. People often do interesting things when they see someone famous.

When the Beatles came to America, people just about lost their minds. It was 56 years ago today that the Beatles made their third appearance on the Ed Sullivan show. You can pull up that video on YouTube and see young people screaming like crazy just to be in the same room with them.¹ It’s surprising anyone could actually hear the music.

Remember “Morganna the Kissing Bandit?” She was a super-fan who used to run out onto the field during major sporting events to steal a smooch from one of her favorite athletes.²

And when people actually meet their idols, it’s not unusual for fans to make odd requests to sort of preserve that moment. Sometimes they just want an autograph or to pose for a picture. But in one interview, Sheryl Crow mentioned that she often gets requests for her to sign someone’s body so that the person can then go, and have it made into a tattoo.³ Actor Morgan Freeman reports that he is frequently asked to record people’s outgoing voicemail messages.⁴ Something he is growing tired of, by the way. And Dascha Polanco from *Orange is the New Black* said that one fan asked her for her lipstick.⁵

But David Walton Smith wins the prize. When he met actor Bill Murray during a commercial shoot, he didn't ask for an autograph or a picture. He asked if he and his friends could film a brief segment with him where they were all walking towards the camera in slow motion like stars in an action movie. Murray agreed.⁶ The result is on Youtube⁷ and it's as epic as you're imagining.

So, bearing all of that in mind, by modern standards, Peter's request to build booths wasn't actually all that weird at all. And it really makes sense if you understand what a booth is to Peter. The NRSV calls these "shelters," but traditionally these are called "booths" and it is from them that the Jewish Festival of Booths gets its name. A booth was a temporary shelter built from branches and whatever other materials were around. It provided shade and some protection from the weather and was used in the fields during harvest time or by soldiers preparing to go into battle.⁸

So, what is Peter doing? It's not every day you see two of the greatest prophets of Israel show up and start talking to your teacher. His intent seems to have been to provide some place for the divine guests to stay. He wanted to extend the experience. He didn't want them to leave. He didn't want the magic to end just yet. Which I think is understandable, especially considering the conversation they have just had before climbing up this mountain.

Matthew tells us just before this story that Jesus asked the disciples who do people say that I am? It's here that Peter confesses that Jesus is "the Messiah, the son of the living God!" Jesus then goes on to explain exactly what that will mean for him: "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."⁹ After rebuking Peter for his disbelief, Jesus tells the disciples "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."¹⁰ It's within this context that they climb the mountain and the events of the transfiguration take place.

So, for Peter, the events of the transfiguration are bittersweet in a way. They confirm what Jesus has just told them. He is who he says he is. And that means exactly what he said it means. Peter knows what must come next. The remainder of their journey will not be easy. "Up here," on the mountaintop, there is light and divinity; there are Old Testament celebrities; there is confirmation of God's presence and of Jesus' identity. But "down there," in the valley, there awaits persecution, suffering, and death.

Who *wouldn't* want to stay for as long as possible? Who *wouldn't* want to bask in the presence of Moses and Elijah? What wisdom could be gleaned by just sitting around the fire listening to them talk with Jesus and one another? And maybe God will speak again. Who wouldn't want to prolong that holy moment?

Here in this story we see two sides of a coin. We see Jesus as messiah; the savior; the embodiment of everything that God is with all the power and glory that one might imagine. But we also see Jesus the human being; the servant, called to walk the journey, to do the will of God, with all the grime and bother that comes with it.

And as much as Peter wants to hold onto it, this glorious moment is only one part of Jesus' story: a moment among many. And though Peter would like it to be the destination, it is but a weigh station on a much longer, more significant trip.

But we can understand Peter. You've probably been where he is yourself. After months of hard work, you finally turn the calendar to the date of your much-anticipated vacation: A whole week off, maybe spent at the beach or camping or at a ski resort. You don't have to think about work. You get to just relax. And one of the hardest things to do is, when that week is over, to come back to reality.

About four years ago we took the boys to Disney World for a week. We stayed in one of the Disney Resorts and spent time in all four of the parks. It was glorious. We rode rides. We met favorite characters. We saw parades and because it was near Halloween, the boys got to trick or treat in the Magic Kingdom. The boys were happy. Mary and I were happy. Everyone had fun. It really went better than we could have ever hoped. And I remember thinking "I wish we could just stay here; in this place, yes, but also in this moment, when life is shiny and bright, and all is right with the world."

But that's not how life works, right? There are responsibilities to be met; commitments to be kept. The boys need to be in school. People count on us being here at the church. The joy and the peace of being in that special place must eventually give way to work and responsibility to which we have been called. And that is what Jesus is showing Peter and James and John here.

And it's a lesson of which we need to be reminded periodically. Resting and recharging is important. That's why one of God's top ten is the requirement that on every seventh day we take a sabbath to rest. But being a disciple is not just about

coming to this place; this comfortable, warm place where we are surrounded by reminders of God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love; where we come together with friends who share our faith and who know our traditions.

Inside a church is the easiest place in the world to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, because except for some notable exceptions, people here understand you and what you believe. We walk similar journeys. The very essence of a church is a place where we support one another as we are supported by one another. But being a disciple also means going out there, beyond these walls and putting in the hard work of building the Kingdom of God in places where people may not know who God is and with people who may not share our faith or our traditions.

It's what I mean when I talk about the comfort and the challenge of the Gospel. We are comforted by the knowledge of God's great love for us and God's grace active in our lives. But we are challenged to go out into the world and live that every day. No matter where the journey takes us.

This week begins the season of Lent, a time when we will worship and pray and prepare ourselves for the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. You see, as Christians, we are very much Easter people. Jewish tradition places the Sabbath on the last day of the week: Saturday. But Christians moved it to Sunday because that's the day when Christ emerged from the tomb. Every Sunday is a "mini-Easter." But Lent is a season that pushes us to think, not about resurrection, but about the human condition that made crucifixion possible and resurrection necessary.

On Palm Sunday we will shout "Hosanna" to the King of Kings! On Easter Sunday we will celebrate that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead! But we don't get to rush to the glorious end of the story. We have to spend a good long time confronting what it means to follow this Jesus we celebrate.

This Transfiguration Sunday is intended to remind us that being a follower of this King who is the Son of God, does not mean escaping from the world into a place of privilege. It's not about building booths, it's about blazing trails. Following Jesus will mean being in the world, being in relationship with all God's children, serving them sometimes, and loving them all the time.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "The Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show." YouTube, 23 Feb. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCOMeF6d1eU.

² Peter, Josh. "Morganna 'The Kissing Bandit' Still in Love with Baseball 50 Years after Debut." *USA Today*, Gannett Satellite Information Network, 21 Oct. 2019, www.usatoday.com/story/sports/mlb/2019/10/21/world-series-morganna-the-kissing-bandit-still-loves-baseball/4045365002/.

³ Slonim, Jeffrey. "What Is the Weirdest Request You've Gotten From a Fan?" *Allure*, 27 June 2016, www.allure.com/gallery/weirdest-fan-requests-to-celebrities.

⁴ "Morgan Freeman Is Tired of Recording People's Voicemail Messages." YouTube, 30 Mar. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpYHpN83d0M.

⁵ Slonim, Jeffrey. "What Is the Weirdest Request..."

⁶ "Living the American Dream - An Interview with Director David Walton Smith | FinalBoss." *FinalBoss*, 8 July 2019, finalboss.io/living-the-american-dream-an-interview-with-director-david-walton-smith.

⁷ "New {fake} Trailer HD." YouTube, 20 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwPgaeldVp4.

⁸ Good, E.M. "Booth." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 1, Abingdon Press, 1991, p. 455.

⁹ Matthew 16:21, NRSV

¹⁰ Matthew 16:24-25, NRSV