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Good News for Wavering Followers

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TEXT: Matthew 17:1-9

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

Every once in a while my faith wavers and it needs to be strengthened and encouraged in order to go on. Perhaps you can identify with that statement from your own personal experience. I know the first disciples of Jesus certainly could. This mountaintop experience described for us in Matthew follows a serious talk Jesus had with those disciples about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection in Jerusalem. He had also told them about what's involved in being a follower of his, that if anyone wanted to follow him and be a disciple, that would mean a willingness on their part to pick up the cross and be willing to suffer and even lose their life for the sake of Jesus. His words had to have stunned them and shaken their faith and morale. They had not expected this kind of thing. It was a painful and frightening future for them to picture: Jesus suffering and dying and them suffering and even losing their lives for his sake. We know it was troubling to Peter because he tried to correct Jesus on this passion prediction and found himself being shut down by Jesus, who told him, "Get behind me,

Satan.” I would imagine it was a rather awkward, to say the least, few days after that. Maybe even some second thoughts were happening about Jesus and this mission amongst those disciples.

This kind of thing can still happen to a follower of Jesus. Our faith can get shaken when bad things happen in our lives, or we have unmet expectations, or when we are experiencing disappointments or facing overwhelming personal challenges, we sometimes will think to ourselves, “But I’m a Christian. I’m one of the good guys. Why are these negative things happening to me? Where are you, Jesus?” Or doubts can take over when you’re faithfully pursuing a mission for Jesus and meeting failure after failure. And in your discouragement, you start wondering, “Jesus, why is this happening? I’m doing the very thing you want me to do, but it is so hard and I can’t help but wonder, are you really with me, as you promised?” And then there are those times when, like those disciples, we sense his calling us to follow him to places or into places with people and situations that make us cringe with fear and apprehension. Or we balk at his instructions, wisdom, and commands we encounter in our Bibles. It sounds so upside down to our natural way of thinking about things, and we say, “That sounds way too unrealistic. I’m not sure I can trust Jesus on this one.” And during those times, oh, how we need a sign or a word of assurance along the way to strengthen, encourage, and keep us believing and following the Savior.

Well, in this story we see God graciously giving Peter, James, and John exactly that on that mountaintop where Jesus led them. They received that day a divine epiphany, a mind-blowing revelation as God pulled out all the stops for them. First, he gave them an amazing visual experience, didn’t he? Jesus was transfigured before them, meaning his face was shining like the sun, and his clothes became white as light, showing the glory he’d had before he became man. And it was also a preview, I imagine, of his future exaltation. And Moses, then Elijah suddenly showed up – can you believe it? – and start talking to him, representing the Old Testament law. That’s Moses and the Prophets. That’s Elijah as a witness to those disciples that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Israel had always been waiting for the law and the Prophets to talk about him. Then the grand finale was given: suddenly a bright cloud that overshadowed them, and this was associated with the presence of God, when he led his people through the wilderness in a cloud. The cloud would settle over the tabernacle, signifying his presence among his people. And now here, those disciples are experiencing the very presence of their Holy God.

The visuals were followed by these words: “This is my beloved son with who I am well pleased.” Here we have God endorsing Jesus as his beloved Son for these men and says he's pleased with him. He's in full support of Jesus. And then his command to those disciples, “So listen to him because he is my son.” Therefore, don't write him off as deluded or out of his mind as someone not to be taken seriously at all. Instead, hear his words as authoritative and divine, to be believed and acted upon accordingly. Give those words credence. His words may sound counterintuitive to your ears, but they are divine truths to be trusted and obeyed. Because when you listen to him, you're listening to me.

Those disciples were struck with such awe and fear that they fell down to the ground and touched their faces to the ground in obeisance until Jesus came and touched them and said, “Get up. Have no fear.” And when they lifted their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. The cloud, Moses, and Elijah were now gone. The shining wasn't there anymore. Things were back to normal.

I wonder if, after that mountain top experience, those disciples maybe felt a bit of gratitude and relief. “Phew. Thank you, Lord, for the gracious revelation. Thanks for shedding some light on Jesus for us.” And it obviously refreshed and renewed them and stuck with them, for they kept believing in him and following him, didn't they? And they at that time also became aware that God was keeping his eye on them in all of this. Years later, Peter would share this experience with God, with other believers, to assure them that the Gospel was not just a clever myth that they made up, but true divine revelation from God to be trusted in. He said, “I was an eyewitness of Christ's Majesty. I heard firsthand the voice of God himself, assuring me that Jesus was his son and that we should listen to Him and trust in him as a way of salvation.” That transfigured experience was a real gift from God, wasn't it? His grace was at work in their lives at that time.

Well, the good news for today is this: the same God who showed up to assure those confused and shaken disciples on the mountain is still present today to assure and reassure those who follow his Son, Jesus Christ. He's here to keep us going in the faith is Christ followers. He knows each one of us personally, you know. He knows everything about us: our strengths, our weaknesses, our joys and our hardships. Everything about us. Jesus taught us that, that God knows us. He said, “Even the hairs on your head are

all numbered. And not a sparrow falls to the ground without God knowing it. And you're so much more value than many sparrows to God." And we also know that he loves and cares about you. I mean, if you doubt that, look at the cross you were died for at the cross. God's son did not die for the sparrow, but for you – to pay for your sins so that you could be forgiven and restored to a holy, loving God. That is extreme love. As Christian writer Tim Keller said, "The truth of the gospel is this: you are more sinful than you could dare imagine, and you are more loved and accepted than you could ever dare hope." He's right.

And finally, God even cares about your ongoing relationship with Jesus and wants to see it grow stronger. That's why He sent His Holy Spirit to work in you. The Spirit's goal is to conform you to the image of God's son and empower you to serve Him in this world.

And last: God will never, ever desert you. Our Heavenly Father never abandons his own children, even though our feelings and Satan might tell us otherwise at times. His grace, mercy, power, and guidance is always available to every person who follows his son Jesus. And he will still make his presence known to us through the working of his Holy Spirit, rekindling faith in us through word and sacrament as we worship him and recall the big story of his love and faithfulness towards a sinful, broken world. As we celebrate that he has all of this creation in the palm of his hand and is in control, that's what happens at worship. And as we open our Bibles and daily devotions and ask him to reveal himself to us and speak his word to us about his will, his love and promises for us, the Holy Spirit uses that as well to shape us and draw us closer to Jesus. There's prayer and solitude: He draws an ear to us in those times and breathes his spirit in us. Sometimes we need to just make some space and time in our day in order to hear him. When you think about it, Jesus led those disciples up a mountain for a retreat from the busyness, the distractions, to draw near to God and experience His presence in power in their lives.

And then sometimes you find his presence in the most surprising ways. Once in a while it's a burning bush type thing or a lightning and thunder. But he gives you a little epiphanies as well. Like this one I read about recently by Pastor Chris Erdman. He writes,

You find God's presence in surprising places. The way pastors work, we easily confuse an outdoor mortar for the wind of the spirit. We're God-called but task-

driven, we find ourselves up to our eyebrows and earthbound pursuits, drafting worship plans, writing memos, reading council minutes, sorting mail, phoning cantankerous parishioners. In the wake of all our religious activity, God gets pushed to the periphery. I want to be Moses, like when he went up on the mountain to get the Ten Commandments. But I feel like Aaron, the priest who was left behind, the one down in the valley, managing camp life. Mount Sinai's lofty craigs are someone else's reality. Pastoral work becomes boring and predictable and routine. Where is the lightning, the fire, the wind, the voice, Where's God?

And then I visit Mary. Today is the first time I will see her in her new home. Just a few days earlier, she was moved from the hospital to the nursing home, a move she dreaded, a move she fought tooth and nail. Mary never planned to spend her golden years in a nursing home. Providence has turned the tables on Mary. Her stroke partially paralyzed one side of her body. Nor can she speak the way she wants to. A woman used to serving others is forced to swallow her pride. She must learn to receive, even in the bustling center of geriatric care, she sits alone in her wheelchair, isolated from family and friends.

As I walked down the hallways of the nursing home, my eye searched for her familiar face. There she is. "Well, Mary," I holler. Mary turns her head. "Oh, my friend." Bright smile, twinkling eyes, warm hug. In this unguarded moment, Mary's speech is clear, but it's when she tries the hardest that things get garbled. Now, Mary desperately wants to talk, but she can't. Her desperation only makes her frustrated. After a few attempts at a conversation, I suggest we wander down to the activity center. "I have a gift for you, Mary," I said. Several years ago, Mary gave me a gift. Her poetry. Mary's poetry is not merely a collection of pretty verses, but an expression of heartfelt devotion to Jesus. A window into a saint at prayer. Today, I want to return the gift. I can't give Mary her speech back, but I can give her the gift of memory. Her eyes betray her eagerness. As I open the envelope and I begin to read the first poem. After just a few words, her eyes brighten. She leans forward and a question forms on her lips. And I say, "Yes, it's yours." Mary smiles and then laughs. "It's good, isn't it?" I say. And she giggles like a schoolgirl. Yes. It's good, Mary.

For the next half hour, we read her poems, pray together, and laugh and worship, surrounded by wheelchairs and white hair, loneliness and boredom. We roar and giggle and feel the presence of Jesus. Down here in the valley, among the ordinary tasks of the day, today, a bit of Heaven opens up. God meets us in ordinary people in an ordinary place.

Oh, how I need to be reminded of that. God is not hiding from us. My fellow believers in Jesus Christ who follow him, may this transfiguration story, first of all, serve to reassure you once again that you're not crazy for trusting and following Jesus. This story was meant to help us reaffirm our faith in Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior, the way the truth and the life to whom one comes to live with the father forever in his house with many rooms. Keep trusting, keep serving him. And next, may this story also serve to awaken and encourage you as a disciple of Jesus in 2023, that God has his eye on you. That's good news. Just like those first disciples, He knows you, He loves you, and he will never abandon you. So, rest in that truth and call upon him for he is available.

I thought I'd end this message today with one of my favorite songs, that is a testimony to what we have been talking about this today.