

Matthew 17:1-9

Six 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."

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At the Pivot Point: God Gives Us All We Need

It is warm, the day they trudge up the mountain. It is wonderful to get away. Things have been so busy below – crowds pressing in, so many sick, so many with great needs. Those climbing the mountain are thrilled to have time alone with the leader, to figure out what is coming next, to ask him their big questions.

Because recently he's been testy, making them squirm. Sometimes his demands seem too hard. Full of all these thoughts, the small band of hikers heads off along dirt paths etched into the sides of hills, and soon they are scrambling up the eroded face of a cliff. By the time they get to the top, one man is drenched in sweat, and pants out, "Where are we going?" After several more hours of hiking, he asks again, "How much further?"

"See that range over there?" says their leader. "We'll go to the range beyond that." Mountains Beyond Mountains.

This scene is from the last chapter of the book with that title: Mountains Beyond Mountains, the best seller ten years ago written by Tracy Kidder about Paul Farmer.ⁱ By now Farmer is well known – the Harvard educated doctor from Boston who provides health care to the poorest of our world, beginning in Haiti. Paul Farmer's organization, Partners in Health, has made a world of difference for millions around the globe, in the care of AIDs and Tuberculosis.

It is author Tracy Kidder who is trudging up the mountain with the leader, Paul Farmer, exhausted by the journey. It is Farmer who points ahead, to the mountain range beyond, to show their destination. Paul Farmer is spending his entire day walking up the mountains to visit two families because he thinks those families are worth his time. When he finds a family with ten children living in a house only 20 feet by 10, with a dirt floor and roof of banana fronds, he understands why TB has spread so quickly there, and what must be done to help.

Tracy Kidder has been famous before Farmer, a Pulitzer prize winner for non-fiction. And now Kidder is trying to understand why a brilliant Harvard doctor, who could have any job he wants, spends most of his time, with far too few supplies, among the poorest in Haiti. Through the book, Mountains beyond Mountains, we learn that Farmer believes in what he calls "O for P" – God's "option for the poor," God's yearning that the poorest are cared for first, as a priority, because the stakes for them are so high. Failure to care for the poor means their death.

Farmer puts his belief into action. Throughout the book, Tracy Kidder pokes and prods at Kidder's work, but by the end, neither he nor we the readers can rattle this conclusion: Farmer serves the poor because he believes they deserve it. They deserve the [of medical care, too.

But this answer about Farmer's *motivation* still begs Kidder's second and larger question: is Farmer serving the poor in the best way? Strategically, should Paul Farmer spend a whole day hiking to two patient, when he could see scores of patients in the village below, or present a new policy to the World Health Organization?

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Jesus' disciples likely have questions similar to Tracy Kidder's when they hike up the mountain with *their* leader in the passage we read today, commonly known as "the Transfiguration."

Think of it: the disciples have seen Jesus' commitment and his brilliance. They've stood enthralled by his words at the Sermon on the Mount. They've been amazed at the way he can heal people. But recently Jesus has begun saying that he needs to leave *their* villages in Galilee and go to Jerusalem, where the tensions between Jesus and the religious authorities will certainly escalate.

When Peter says what they've all been thinking – that to go to Jerusalem is suicidal – Jesus had called Peter the Devil! "Get behind me Satan!" "Don't tempt me! Don't you think I understand how hard it will be? Of course I'd rather not move forward and keep things just the same here."

So going up that mountain with Jesus, the disciples must be wondering, over and over in their mind, similar questions to those Tracy Kidder has about Paul Farmer. Is this person the "real thing," the one we should follow?" and if so, does he have the right strategies for bringing his ministry to fruition?

These can be our questions, too: Is this Jesus the real thing, genuine, one worth following? And even if what he preached and how he lived draws us, strategically, does it make sense? Strategically, where *should* we be headed next – here at King's Chapel, or in your own life?

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Here's the Good News in today's lesson: on that mountain top God answers all these questions, and provides disciples with all they need to move forward. At this key pivot point in their lives, as they wonder what they should do, God gives the disciples all they need for the next tough leg of their journey, once they've gone back down the mountain.

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What does God give them?

We don't know exactly what happened that day at the top of the mountain. But we do know that for listeners in Matthew's time, mountains *always* represent important places where God *meets people*. Jesus gives his most important Sermon *on the Mount*. Moses gets the 10 commandments on Mount Sinai. Elijah – the greatest of all God's prophets – defeats the sham god Baal on Mount Carmel. In the Gospel of Matthew, mountains represent important places, where people can meet God.

We also know that for the Jewish readers of Matthew's text, the ones for whom he wrote, Moses represents the Law (the Commandments). Elijah represents the Prophets. So when Jesus is talking to Moses and to Elijah, Jesus is being brought alongside all the Law and the Prophets, the vital Jewish teaching central to Matthew's Jewish readers.

And if that symbolism isn't enough, on the mountain the disciples see Jesus more clearly than ever before. Jesus is bathed in a great light, his clothes look bright white, his face radiates -- the same Biblical descriptions of Moses, after Moses had been on the mountain top close to God, or in the tent of meeting where Moses went to talk with God "face to face."

Up there, on that day, the disciples understand God affirming: "Jesus is my beloved child." The student disciples have a breakthrough in understanding, an epiphany. That's why we read the lesson today, the last Sunday of the Epiphany season.

Is Jesus the one to follow? This first question of the disciples is answered "Yes!" "Listen to him."

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Listen to him. Listen.

In a way, isn't this always what we do, when we value another person? We listen to her, attentively. We listen to him, with care.

Paul Farmer says that Listening is what distinguishes the work of Partners in Health from other social justice agencies: the deep commitment Partners staff have to what they even call "reverentⁱⁱ listening". Two weeks ago Paul Farmer was in Cambridge,

meeting with a group of students through the Harvard Divinity School Program for Science, Religion and Culture. One of the catalysts was a young student currently studying for both her Masters in Divinity and her Masters in Public Health degrees.

When Farmer was asked by the hundreds who gathered to hear him why his programs have such a major impact on global health, Farmer said it is because they design their medical interventions *after* understanding the point of view of the poor whom they serve. They listen. They value highly the poorest and listen to what the patients have to say. For example:

Instead of throwing up their hands at patients who fail to take medications and decrying them as lazy or ignorant, officials at Partners In Health ask patients why they don't take their prescriptions and [then] work to lower costs, increase access, and remove other roadblocks.

*"Instead of saying 'failure to adhere,' [we ask] them how **we** failed them, how **we** can remove the barriers to good health."ⁱⁱⁱ*

Listen to him, said the voice on high. Listen, so you can *change*.

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Change didn't seem a top priority for Peter on the mountain. He wanted to keep things just as they were – to build booths so he could put Elijah and Moses right inside them, and stay on the mountaintop to worship them.

We can feel the same way. Change is never easy. And when, like dear Peter, we've once had an insight, a religious experience -- maybe in a special place, like the mountaintop, we often want to stay right there, and keep that special space just as it was. To capture the experience, and put it in a booth, so we can nostalgically recall how we felt, when everything felt full of light. Who wouldn't want to stay on the mountaintop, where we can see from a wider perspective, where we finally can be away from the thorny problems below that resist solution, away from the thorny people with whom we don't agree.

Let's build boxes, says Peter, and keep everything just the way it is, right now. Our little group and God. Just us, as it is right now!

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But at its core, the transfiguration story is about change. Transfiguration *means* change -- a change in appearance where even greater beauty is seen. Someone's face can be transfigured by love. Jesus is transfigured and shines! When Jesus is seen most clearly, for whom he is, the Beloved of God, a light shines on *and through him*.

As it can for you! And for all of us, in God's beloved community. Here we can experience a time when we are seen – finally – for who we really are, for our status as children of God, too, right alongside Moses and Elijah. In God's beloved community are all of us humans who over time stumbled and bumbled – as did even Moses and Elijah – but who kept getting up again, yearning to grow closer to God.

We can radiate, be transfigured, be transformed. No longer even wanting to live in our little, comfortable boxes, because they confine who we can be, are meant to be!

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But if Transfiguration is about us experiencing our lives, ourselves in a new light, is Jesus' strategy for changing us, for changing the world, really the best one? Because his strategy is to go back down the mountain, and moving inexorably toward the teeming city, full of problems?

Is all his talk of loving enemies, of building a beloved community, really the right strategy? Is all of Paul Farmer's talk -- of valuing each patient so much that it's worth a whole day for him to walk up mountains to treat a handful of Haitians in a distant shack?

Amidst questions just like ours, on the mountain top, the disciples got what they needed – because Jesus says these words to them: Do not be afraid, and he touches them, and he helps them up to their feet again, so together they can all go down and on to Jerusalem. "Get up," he says, "touching them." "Do not be afraid."

"Get up. Do not be afraid."

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I am convinced that we receive the same messages at key turning points in our lives, when we stand at some threshold, uncertain of what to do. It might be our retirement or the offer of a new job, a change at school or where you live. It could be facing the future without a beloved one on whom you've depended, or health challenges for you or your family.

At these pivotal moments of change and challenge, you too are invited to see God more clearly. To listen more deeply. To feel God's touch of love. To get up and not be afraid, because you'll be journeying with God, never alone.

As we look ahead, it's my vision that King's Chapel can represent all the pieces of today's Transfiguration Story.

A place, like the mountain, where people can meet God. Where they can see, just a bit more clearly, the holy mystery behind this universe, bathed in new light, a fresh perspective. A place where people can experience God's touch, and hear words saying, Get up. Do not be afraid.

Friends, What will we represent for the thousands of people who annually pass by here? And for the many area residents not yet among us, but craving a progressive faith? In future years, what will all these say King's Chapel represents?

What will they say, based on our space and actions, based on our music and lived lives, "O yes, King's Chapel: that's the church where..... Those are the people who....."

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In Haiti, at the top of the mountain when Tracy Kidder and Paul Farmer finally stop their long, long ascent, Farmer kneels with his stethoscope on the dirt floor to listen to the heart of the family's father, a man who has lost his legs in an accident. Author Tracy Kidder thinks of all the critics who would say this has been a wasted day, to serve so few. But by now Kidder knows Farmer well enough to anticipate Farmer's response:

"If you say seven hours is too long to walk for two patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others', and the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world." (294)

By his actions, we know what Paul Farmer represents: He's the one who serves the poorest, against all odds.

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So now we go down the mountain together, into Lent. A time for each of us to take a more inward journey, to discover where we're more inclined to build boxes when God calls us to change. Where God calls us to be a voice and hands for those so needy for hope.

Let us dream large, like the large vision on the top of the mountain. Dream as Paul Farmer has, starting with just a handful of colleagues. Trust that whatever we need to continue God's work here, God will provide for us.

And may God's people say, Amen.

ⁱ Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, Random House (New York), 2003

ⁱⁱ "In the Company of the Poor": New Book by Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez," <http://www.pih.org/blog/in-the-company-of-the-poor> (Nov. 11, 2103).

ⁱⁱⁱ Alvin Powell, Harvard Gazette, "A Faith in Global: Paul Farmer, Partners in Health Founder, Was Inspired by Liberation Theology," <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/news-events/articles/2014/02/14/a-faith-in-global-care> (February 14, 2104).