

“Don’t Just Do Something; Stand There!”

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Exodus 24:12-18; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

I first went to the mountains in the back of a black, Rambler station wagon. We were headed for Ridgecrest, the Baptist assembly near Black Mountain. As the little Rambler coughed and sputtered up a long, torturous grade, the family rowdily sang, "I love the mountains, I love the rolling hills!" Sometimes it felt like we sang in part to encourage the car.

Somehow, we made it to the top, spilled out of the panting vehicle, and sucked in the crisp, cool breath of God. Like the ancient Hebrews making an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem, my family went to Ridgecrest every year. Because while God might occasionally drop in on my childhood church in Greensboro, everyone knew God *lived* in the mountains.

Years later, John Denver captured my love of the mountains in his hard-driving acoustical hit, "Rocky Mountain High." Whenever I heard that song, chill bumps popped up on my arms like my own private mountain range. And since Bambi and I went to college in the foothills of North Carolina, we spent our share of time in the mountains. One night on a religious retreat, we slipped outside to watch for falling stars above the hills. I'm not sure if the night sky yielded any, but when we kissed, I saw a few.

Yes, like a surging river, my love of the mountains runs deep. So I understand why mountains are so important in the Bible. It's because on a mountaintop, heaven and earth meet. And from such a lofty peak, where often the living God draws near, you can see your life and your world in a whole new way.

Once Peter, James, and John retreated with Jesus to a mountaintop, perhaps Mount Hermon's majestic 9,000 foot peak. And while near the summit, God's glory began pulsating and pouring through Jesus like a star being born in the inky blackness of deepest space. The Bible calls this extraordinary event the Transfiguration from the Greek word for *metamorphosis*, meaning Jesus' radiant inner essence shone through his person. Matthew describes the transfiguration as a vision, but that doesn't mean the disciples dreamed it up. Rather that with their eyes illumined by the Holy Spirit, they saw the more real instead of the less real, much as a soldier putting on night vision goggles suddenly perceives what was there all along, but not seen before.

As this spectacle unfolds, two giants of the Hebrew Bible appear, Moses and Elijah. They huddle with Jesus as if to reassure him that his grasp of the divine call--to win the world through a costly, sacrificial love--is indeed, what God intends. Meanwhile, the disciples reel with awe, wondering what to do.

Then Peter, the consummate extrovert, starts thinking with his mouth: "Lord, it is good for us to be here! If you wish, I'll make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah!"

At that, a thundercloud popping with lightning descends on the mount and blows with furious force. From within the cloud, a thunderous voice sounds, "This is my son, the beloved, with (whom) I am well pleased. *Listen to him!*"

The three disciples hit the deck, cowering in fear. And then, as quickly as it started, heaven's broadside is over. Jesus draws near and reaches for his disciples: "You can get up now. There's no need to be afraid." They look up from a fetal crouch and see Jesus only. And the mountaintop, seconds before a place of terror, is the picture of calm.

Peter gets a lot of bad press in Christian history for being a blabbermouth, quick to speak and slow to listen. But at least in this instance, the first thing he says is profoundly true: "Lord, it is good for us to be here!" It *is* good for the disciples to be there because Jesus invited them to share in his struggle for discernment and in whatever else might transpire on that mountain.

The problem comes for Peter, as for us, in moving at warp speed from being *with* Jesus to acting and speaking on his behalf. That's when God blows a fuse: "This is my son!" the Holy One snaps. "Listen to him!"

Recently, I read an article by a doctor titled, "When Doing Nothing is the Best Medicine." In the article, the physician admits the pressure doctors feel to be the all-knowing, all-powerful healers everyone expects them to be. But sometimes, maybe always, the first and most important thing a doctor can do is to slow down and listen to the patient, probing symptoms, asking questions, and *not* jumping to conclusions. So often while making rounds with his medical students, this doctor tells his charges, "Don't just do something. Stand there!" Stand there and listen and probe and ponder.

This is what God demands of the disciples on the mountain: "Don't just do something. Stand there! Stand there with Jesus and be with Jesus long enough to really listen to him. Then and only then, dare attempt anything in his name."

This Wednesday marks the start of Lent, a 40-day season of spiritual preparation for the celebration of Easter. The 40 days of Lent are drawn from the 40 days Jesus spent in the

wilderness and the 40 days both Moses and Elijah spent on the mountaintop with God. The challenge of Lent, the work of Lent is to heed God's command -- "This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him!" -- by stopping our incessant doing long enough to listen, really listen to Jesus. Only then can we begin to see ourselves and our world differently. Can you imagine how transforming it would be if we covenanted to listen to Jesus during Lent at least as much as we listen to Fox news or CNN?!

Toward that end, our adult education and children's ministries have developed some resources to help us. This colorful Lenten calendar features a daily Lenten prayer for parents and children, such as "God of refuge, give us health and healing," or "Bless the fields and farmlands that surround us." By adding this simple prayer practice to your family's daily routine, you can help your child learn the rhythms of grace.

There is also a printed or online Bible study for youth and adults featuring a brief Bible reading and reflection for each day of Lent. And also a prayer guide. Here, in no more than 15 minutes a day, you can still your mind and heart long enough for God's word to catch up with you and call your name. As Bonhoeffer writes in *Life Together*, "For Christians, the beginning of the day should not be burdened and oppressed with besetting concerns for the day's work. At the threshold of the new day stands the Lord who made it. All the darkness and distraction of the dreams of night retreat before the clear light of Jesus Christ and his wakening word."

Where might your mountaintop be where you and Jesus can spend some quality time together? Mine is the second story window of my home study where I look out over a lake. Each morning, the blue heron and I meet, eye-balling one another from a distance, as she waits for minnows and I wait for God. As the dawn shines brighter and the morning warms up, the squirrels start chasing each other through the trees and the birds flutter about the feeder, waiting their turn before gratefully landing. All creation stirs to life as the birds tweet their praise

and the geese start squawking and flapping their way toward heaven. Yes, from my Ridgecrest days to now, I feel God's nearness when from some lofty height, I see the glory of creation sprawled before me.

Where might you find your sacred time and space for reflection and renewal during Lent? It might be a favorite easy chair or coffee shop. But if you will show up to listen to Jesus, sometimes Jesus will speak. As 2 Peter suggests, "You will do well to be attentive to (God's word) as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." This graphic image suggests sometimes when reading the Bible, a particular word or phrase burns its way into your consciousness, like a flare searing its presence into the darkest of nights. That's when God's word *in general*, becomes God's word *to you*.

Just don't hear me saying that listening to Jesus is all ecstasy and bliss. Often, Jesus' word is deeply troubling. In fact, the Hebrew word for "glory" shares a root with the word "heaviness." Because sometimes when God's glory descends upon the mountain, it brings a great heaviness of heart and a divine summons to come down from one's lofty peak with Jesus and get one's hands dirty doing some useful work for the kingdom.

Like the letter of support one of our members wrote this week to the embattled mosque in Clemmons, targeted and terrified by hate speech. The leaders of the Annoor Islamic Center were so moved by what they read, they asked to share that letter with the entire congregation last Friday. One of those Muslim friends wrote our Knollwood sister, "That message was so kind of you. Let me share something with you. All countries and all places are the same. They have land, skies, and rivers. The difference is the people. People like you make this country better than other countries. I have the option to take my family and leave to go to Egypt, but I choose to stay here because of people like you. We always love this country, but people like you make us love it more."

Or what of the hastily-called but lavishly prepared covered-dish luncheon held yesterday in our fellowship hall. Refugees and immigrants from Burma, Egypt, the Congo, and Syria were present, eagerly and happily mixing with the locals. The children were the most fearless and gregarious. The room so aptly named the “fellowship” hall was full of smiles and laughter, as amid the colorful flowing scarfs and headdresses, people from various nationalities--in Pentecost-like fashion--spoke the single language of love. One of Knollwood’s own, watching the spectacle unfold, shook her head and murmured, “I hope heaven is like this!”

Or what of the Syrian toddler, Momo, mauled by pit bulls in Greensboro and rushed to Brenner Children’s Hospital for eight hours of emergency surgery. There at a hospital founded by Baptists, that little Muslim boy received state-of-the-art medical care that saved his life. Now, I’m told, he is beginning to act like a little boy again as his family swells with hope. And all because of those good people in America who refuse to let fear and hatred call the shots. Indeed, it sure sounds to me, like *somebody* has been listening to Jesus!

Thank God, amid the hue and cry of our 24/7 news cycles and the strident voices of hate and division, there is another option. We can follow Jesus to the mountaintop and there hush the noise of our worries, and business, and self-importance. And with an open Bible and an open heart, listen for Jesus and listen to Jesus. Because if we do, we just might be transfigured too. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Maybe at the end of the day, the real miracle is not the transfiguration of Jesus. Maybe the miracle God is hoping for and banking on is the transfiguration of *us*.

As Marilynne Robinson’s preacher, John Amos of *Gilead*, says it, “It (seems to me) sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of creation and it turns to

radiance--for a moment or a year or the span of a life. . . . (Then) wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.”

I believe that can happen if we will but listen for, and strive to follow, Jesus.

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Eternal God, during our Lenten journey with Jesus, teach us to listen first and foremost to him that empowered by his grace, truth, and love, we might grow to be just a little more like him. In Jesus' name we pray and hope to live. Amen.

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