

Sermon – Matthew 17:1-9  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Transfiguration – Year A  
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“Back Down the Mountain”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It was a beautiful early morning at Gardner Dam Boy Scout Camp, nestled against the wild Wolf River in northeast Wisconsin. At least, I think it was a beautiful morning. I can't say for sure, as I was sound asleep. We all were, our entire troop, blissfully exhausted from the prior day's activities – orienteering, tying sheet bends, rolling our kayaks, and a hundred other things. We had, in fact, collectively slept in past the time when we could get our breakfast food from the camp commissary. But while we boys slept the morning away, one man was awake in the camp: my father. And he was not only awake, but stewing in ever-increasing anger at our slumberous state. Finally, he could take it no longer, and called out in a loud voice that cut short our dreaming: “I want everyone awake in five minutes – RIGHT NOW!” I turned groggily to my tent mate, rubbed my eyes, and asked the question that must have been on every boy's mind: “So, um, does he want us to wake up right now, or do we have five more minutes?” I don't think any of us had the temerity to ask my father that question in the moment, but it has become a bit of a running joke in our family. And really, what can I say? Sometimes you just want to stay in your tent, dreaming pleasant dreams where everything is safe and warm and comfortable.
2. So it was for Peter, James, and John that day when they went up the mountain with Jesus. Suddenly, Jesus is transfigured, completely changed, shining now with God's holy light. Just as suddenly, Moses the lawgiver and Elijah the

prophet appear, confirming Jesus' identity as the One who has come to fulfill God's promises of old. Peter, thinking this is a good place to be, suggests that they set up camp. He offers to build three tents, or dwellings as it is translated in our reading, so that they can all remain comfortably on the mountain. And who can blame Peter for wanting to stay there – there where things are suddenly so clear, there in God's presence where all is safe and warm, high above the dusty fray of daily life and the cares of discipleship? Goodness knows how often I, how often we, yearn for an escape, a mountaintop experience; for safety and security; for this world's problems to fade away. Can't we just have five more minutes?

3. Jesus does not respond to Peter's request; instead, a loud voice breaks their reverie, the Son's Father calling out: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" And what does Jesus say? That they can sleep in, take it easy, play it safe? No: "Get up," he says. Get up, and go back down the mountain. Get up, and do not be afraid. Get up, and tell no one of what you have seen. Not yet, anyway.
4. Jesus, you see, has not brought these three disciples up the mountain so that they may escape from reality. Quite the opposite, in fact. Jesus has brought them up so that they might behold the most real thing of all – that Jesus is God's Son, God's beloved, the One to whom the law and the prophets attest, the One who fulfills the law and the prophets for the sake of God's people. This affirmation is offered to Peter, James, and John not as an escape, but as food for the journey. The mountain is a good place to be, but it is no place to stay – not yet; more to the point, it is not where God needs us. And the good news, the good news is that Jesus, the One transfigured, does not simply send his friends back down the mountain. Jesus goes with them, that the whole world may be transfigured through him – through his dying and through his resurrection, foreshadowed by the transfiguration itself.

5. Jesus himself goes down the mountain so that he could more fully reveal the glory of God, shown forth most clearly not in dazzling brightness but hidden under the cover of darkness and death upon the cross of Calvary. This is why Jesus tells the disciples to tell no one of what they have seen upon the mountain until after he has been raised; it only matters that he is the One transfigured because he is also the One crucified. And we, though blessed with moments of rest and times of transcendence, are called to cruciform living. We are called down from the mountain into this world's brokenness. But we do not go alone, and we do not go as the same people we once were. Jesus tells his friends, even us, to get up. This phrase in Greek is the same one used later in Matthew's Gospel by the angels at the tomb: "He is not here; he has been raised." When Jesus says get up, he is commanding us to be raised from the dead – to enter back into the world where death still stalks to be bringers of life. That is why Jesus can say, "Do not be afraid." The final enemy will be conquered when Jesus leaves the mountain; the enemy of death has been conquered for us. We can enter into this world's woes unafraid to face them, for we, in Christ, have nothing left to fear.
  
6. This morning in worship, we are commissioning our small group leaders for their important work in our conversations about racism, a daily-life conversation as needful as ever in a world in which we are told to fear those who look different than us. This is hard, holy work, but it is also ministry of which we need not be afraid. And on this day when we hear again of the glorious, dazzling brightness and whiteness of God's transfigured Son, it is important to name that we are not hearing an affirmation of the goodness or the privilege of whiteness over and against darker hues. The light that shines through Jesus is not a light that values one group of people instead of another. Rather, it is the illuminating light in which we are finally invited to see the truth – the truth about our own complicity in the sinfulness and racism of this world, the truth that God's light shines out over all creation and all people, and the truth that there is now a light to enable us to see a better

way forward – a way, Jesus’ way, that is meant for all people so that here, here in the valleys of real life, we can be drawn closer to God and draw closer to one another.

7. This Wednesday we enter once more into Lent. We will be marked with ash and reminded of our mortality. We do so, however, fortified with Jesus’ promise of life already given to us. Jesus has left the comforts of heaven; Jesus has left the reverie of the mountaintop; Jesus has left it all behind to go to the cross. To die. For you. That you may live, and live now unafraid. The light travels with you, and no darkness can overcome it. There is a beautiful scene fairly early in *The Lord of the Rings* in which Galadriel gives Frodo a phial containing the starlight of Earendil. And while I will spare you any further comments regarding my dorky devotion to the fantastical works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Galadriel’s words in this moment of gifting are true for us, we who have beheld the dazzling light of Jesus on the mountain and follow him down toward the cross. She says simply, “May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out.” So get up, friends, for the light has called you forth. Rise up – not in five minutes, but right now. Be raised and live without fear. You can’t stay on the mountain forever, but the brightness of Jesus goes down with you to light your way. Listen to him. Live in the certain hope of resurrection, and do not be afraid. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, today and forever. Amen.