

## Can We Be Transformed?

Matthew 17:1-9

February 19, 2023

Last summer, a book entitled *Quarterlife* was published, and I of course took an interest in this book. The author, a psychotherapist, writes about what she has witnessed in her practice working with Quarterlifers, which she defines as those 16 to 36 in age. She concludes that there are two common ways that people navigate through seasons of major transitions: stability seekers and meaning makers. Stability types are prone to inherit the to-do lists given to them by the culture and check the boxes—work, partnership, a place to plant roots—and you can imagine that the checklist goes on. I have one of my own, as I identify in this camp. But those folks may find that their life is devoid of purpose or even unfulfilling. The boxes are checked, but where is the meaning? And meaning types often toss out the to-do list and seek out expressive, adventurous experiences, but end up feeling unmoored and even directionless. Not to mention the people who love them feel a little unmoored as well.

Right here in this morning's passage, with a group of quarterlifers—or mid-lifers if we're adjusting for life expectancy—it's easy for us to spot, on this mountain, the character cast in the stability role. Peter wants to build three dwelling places for God, Moses, and Elijah. It will give them a place to plant roots for a while (check). And work that they can do—a building project with tabernacles to tend (check, check). But Peter's building project is interrupted by the great cloud that is God, a moment of disarming meaning in a sea of Peter's search for stability. And he and James and John are cast to the ground as God speaks. They're overwhelmed by awe, wonder, fear, and trembling.

They hear God say the words spoken at Jesus' baptism, but then God adds those three simple

words: "listen to him." *Listen to him.* God is not merely instructing them to listen up and perceive the words, but he wants them to pay attention and attend to what they are to do next. And what do they hear next? What do they see?

Well, in my experience, this part of the story is often misremembered within our church circles. We think the disciples are shunned or even called fools. As one among us said to me the other day, we hear, "Poor Peter, getting it wrong in front of the teacher again." But Jesus does not have him pull a card or stand on the line at recess, like I may have done once or twice as a child. Jesus goes to his friends. And he touches them, and he instructs them to arise and to not fear. Because there is no shame in Peter's desire for stability. No shame. But Jesus wants the disciples to pay attention to the meaning that is rushing towards them.

And because of Jesus' kindness, his tenderness with them, when they raise their eyes, they are able to see it: Jesus is alone. Subsumed within him is the fullness of the story of our faith. He is the fulfillment of the law and the words spoken by the prophets. The Tabernacle where God is pleased to dwell. He will give them the meaning and the stability they are seeking no matter their season of life. He can offer them solidity in this world that he is turning upside down, as we've been hearing. They need only pay attention to him. *Listen up.*

And they must pay attention because what happens next will transform everything. It will not feel stable as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem, and the meaning will not be immediately clear when the women first proclaim that the tomb is empty, for he is risen. So, they have to pay close attention because the world

they know is tipping over, and so their commissioning on that mountain is fitting for their moment: “Arise and do not fear.”

After all, the story of transfiguration in Matthew’s gospel comes immediately after Jesus has instructed his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. And it comes right before Jesus will heal a young boy with epilepsy. We must pay attention because this mountaintop moment is not unfolding on a stage of non-stop, shiny, sequined dance numbers. It’s happening in the cracks between moments of miraculous healing, perplexing teachings about the last being first and the first being last, lost sheep, lost coins, and life-altering calls to pick up our cross and follow him. Jesus’ friends were catechized, instructed, and equipped for their mountaintop moment by witnessing and participating in Jesus’ ministry in the valley. Because in the words of Pope Gregory I, “Those who wish to hold the fortress of contemplation, must first of all train in the camp of action.”<sup>ii</sup>

To be transformed into those who can behold God’s glory in dazzling splendor, they first had to follow Jesus in the slow, daily, mundane work of ministry. Some among us, I fear, have been taught that we must first have the mountaintop experience before we practice the work of ministry, but that’s not what Matthew’s gospel teaches. Some among us have been taught that the mountaintop is for some people and that the work of ministry is for others. Perhaps you, too, feel you have been sorted into groups: the mystics and the missionaries, the workers and the worshipers.

The witness of Jesus interrupts all of that to tell a different story. *So, listen up!* God took on flesh to be with all of us and all of who we are. We are created as spiritual people in skin. We are bodies built for purpose and for praise. On an inward journey and embedded in communities crying out for investment in their flourishing. Not with our do-gooding or grandstanding, but in relationships of neighborly mutuality. Because on the mountain and on mission, we discover that Jesus is not just transforming *them* but transforming *us*. We yearn for meaning

on that mountain, and we seek to build stability in community. And all of it transforms us. Both are true. Both must be true.

Because these mountaintop moments, they will come along the way as we live these enfleshed lives. We will be interrupted as we *listen to Jesus*, and as we do the work of ministry alongside him. If you’ve had such an encounter, you know that they endow this work with deep meaning. They awe us. They assure us. They spur us on to serve with new hope. But perhaps more dazzling is the promise that God is not confined to a mountain, nor is God confined in this sanctuary. It is when we are following Jesus, wherever he leads, that we will find him surprising us, interrupting us. In the face of a child teaching us what it looks like to follow and act like Jesus, to offer beauty and grace to another. That’s dazzling. Or when we sit down at table alongside someone we have long been encouraged to overlook or to live apart from. That is dazzling. Or in sharing communion with someone who we were once estranged from. That is dazzling. These are the moments that interrupt us, that awe and alter us. Because when we listen for him wherever we go, we discover our transformation is tied up with the transformation of the world. We, like the disciples, must arise and go because the mountain is only part of the mission of God. *The mountain is only part of the mission of God.*

As I’ve been contemplating my own temptation to set up camp, to seek stability on the mountain, I have been turning over the words of the poet Ángel González in his piece *A Message for Statues*. He writes these words:

You, fiercely  
misshapen stones,  
cracked  
by the accurate point of the chisel,  
will exhibit for centuries to come  
the final form they gave you: [...]  
And yet [...]  
the scornful faith of your impassive  
gestures, will one day  
meet their end  
Time is more tenacious.

The earth awaits  
 you too.  
 [...] you will be,  
 if not ashes,  
 then ruins,  
 dust [...]  
 To the rock you'll return as rock,  
 [...] having once lived the hard, solemn,  
 illustrious, triumphant, equestrian dream  
 of a glory built to recall something  
 also scattered in oblivion. <sup>iii</sup>

I have been thinking about it because we sit today on the last Sunday after Epiphany. The Magi have seen the star, the baby clothes have been packed away, and the parables have written a promise on the hearts of all who had ears to hear. And now we look ahead to the season of Lent. This Wednesday we will observe Ash Wednesday, and we'll recall that we, like the statues we are so prone to sculpt, have come from dust and to dust we shall return.

In our search for stability, we often fancy ourselves immovable figures, and we may be prone to want to worship a rigid God as well. But Jesus interrupts all that. Jesus is on the move and knows that time is more tenacious and that his time is about to come. So instead of allowing us to build statues meant to recall something scattered into oblivion, Jesus does something better. He uses the dust endowed to him to be with us, to journey through the valley alongside us, to save us because, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, he bears our infirmities, and by his bruises he makes us whole.

And so, like Jesus, therein lies the truth about us, the truth that sets us apart from statues: we can choose what to do with our dust.

The writer of *Quarterlife* points out another common habit she sees in those coming of age in these

challenging times: a trend toward ambivalence. Resignation. A spirit of "why bother." And when we turn on the news, it is so easy to feel ourselves shrug. Another act of violence. Another environmental crisis. Another. Another. Another. God interrupts all of that and sends us Jesus Christ, God in flesh. So, we cannot resign from the world because we have been interrupted by God. We have been offered stability in the presence of Jesus Christ, whom we can follow when we do not know where or how to make the next move, and offered meaning as we can now recognize the dust endowed to us is a gift that we are to steward. And we can use these lives to participate with Jesus Christ in the co-creation of a more just and whole world. By his bruises, we are made whole.

And isn't that who we are called to be, Second Presbyterian Church?

A church for the city. Invested in our city. Working alongside our neighbors. Not in the dark of buildings confining, not in some heavens light years away. Not statues sequestered from the story of the world, but dust endowed with breath, sent out to be in transformative relationship with the world.

That is what it means to be transformed—to recognize that the mountain is only part of the mission of God and to use the dust endowed to us to go with God to be in community with the world Christ is reconciling to himself. So, the question "Can we be transformed?" hinges on another. Can we listen up? Can we be led? Will we follow Jesus down the mountain?

The season of Lent offers us the chance to say yes. Today could be the day, this could be the week, we decide or resolve anew to use our dust to follow him into the world that he so loves. May it be so. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Byock, Satya Doyle. *Quarterlife: The Search for Self in Early Adulthood*. Random House, 2022.

<sup>ii</sup> C., Placher William. *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005.

<sup>iii</sup> "5 Poems of Ángel González." *Cordite Poetry Review*, 18 Oct. 2020, [cordite.org.au/translations/melchor-gonzalez/](http://cordite.org.au/translations/melchor-gonzalez/).