

WGUMC March 1, 2020 Lent 1

“From Transfiguration to Temptation”

Matthew 4:1-11

Before we spend an entire season in the mountains, I want to lift up (no pun intended) a particular kind of high-altitude sickness that our spirits are prone to. I want to talk about the temptation of “Up.” Up is a popular destination. It’s the direction we all want to go. “Onward and upward,” my husband likes to say. Your grandparents may have said, “Up and at ‘em.” And we sing, “That Great Gittin’ Up Mornin’.” Dr. Seuss even wrote a book about it, called Great Day for Up. He says, “Up! Up! Up! Great day for Up! Wake every person, pig and pup, till EVERYONE on earth is up!”

This week, I got to wondering why we have such an obsession with elevation. Lucky for us, there are two mountaintop stories in our Bible that give us some reasons. We read one of them today. Matthew says that the Spirit leads Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted, literally tested, by the devil. The first test comes when he is famished, and the devil tempts him to turn stones into bread. In the second test, the devil takes him to the pinnacle of religious

power, the temple, and tempts him to jump off of it to prove that he is the Son of God. But it is the third test that I'm interested in today.

After failing twice to tempt Jesus, the devil takes him to a very high mountain to show him all the kingdoms of the world and all their splendor. Here the devil offers him political power, if only Jesus will fall down and worship him.

The devil knows that the temptation of power, whether religious or political or any other kind, is much stronger than that of food or sex or anything else. And plenty of people have fallen for it. Power is the ultimate intoxicant, far better than drugs. From way up there, the view is head-spinningly spectacular. In fact, the farther up you go, the better the view is. For you can look down on the kingdoms of the world and all you can see from that distance is their splendor. From that height, you can't see their problems. You can't see the broken streets, the broken homes, the broken lives. You don't have to think about them, worry about them, or take

responsibility for them. That's why monarchs love mountains, because life is grand when you can get above it all.

To have that kind of power, to be able to lift ourselves up—without taking a drug—so high that we can't see anyone's problems, including our own: that is a mighty temptation. And Jesus resisted it with all his might. Because he knew that God didn't send him to sit on top of a mountain so he could stay above the fray. God sent him to dive deep down into our lives, to bring God's splendor into our little \_\_it show (a little indelicate, but accurate).

Jesus did not stay on that mountain for long, not as long as I would have wanted to, because he had important things to do. He immediately went down to his people in Galilee to begin his ministry, doing the down and dirty work of teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of God's kin-dom, and curing every disease and sickness among them. [Matthew 4:23]

Reading this story made me think of another story, one that I didn't preach on last week. If you come from a liturgical tradition

that follows a schedule of readings, you may remember that at the end of the season of Epiphany is the Feast of the Transfiguration. So, the Gospel reading for last week was the story of the time when Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a mountain where he was transfigured before them. [Matthew 17:1-8] And it occurred to me that this is another story of temptation on a mountain. But this time, the temptation is not for power, but for glory.

Matthew says that Jesus' face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Then, all of a sudden, Moses and Elijah showed up as if they had come for afternoon tea. Can you imagine what Peter must have been thinking? I know what we would be thinking: "Why didn't I bring my cell phone so I could get a selfie? My Facebook friends would be so jealous. I wonder if I could somehow bottle up this feeling and sell it."

Peter also wanted to capture the moment, which is why he offered to build three booths or tents, one for Jesus, one for Moses

and one for Elijah. He wanted them to stay up there, so he could bask in their glory, so that he could bliss out.

How many of you have ever gone on retreat and didn't want to go home? I'll have you know that we have a men's retreat coming up this month, and if you're a guy, I encourage you to go. It is so rare that our spirits have a chance to get on top of that mountain that you shouldn't miss this opportunity. But don't be surprised if you don't want to come back down.

Ask any of our youth how hard it is to come back from a mission trip. Lisa and Kat always warn the parents as the vans are pulling into the parking lot: "Over the past several days, your child has had some incredibly intense experiences with their peers and people other than their parents. They may not be ready to share it. They are tired and they may give you the silent, surly treatment when you pick them up. Be patient. It may take them a long while to get down from that mountain." I bet that the same goes for the Scouts coming back from their 50-miler.

The sad truth is that no one can stay up there forever. Peter's dreams of mountaintop glory came crashing down when God spoke from the bright cloud that had suddenly overshadowed them. In an echo from Jesus' baptism, the disciples hear the words, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Then down the mountain they went, back down to reality, back down to the pressures and problems, the crises and catastrophes of real life. No sooner had Jesus descended from the mountain than a man rushed up to him and begged him to cure his son of epilepsy. Welcome home, Jesus!

The story of the transfiguration is another mountain story about temptation, but it is also a story about transformation. Jesus is saying the same thing to the disciples that he said to the devil, "I don't go up the mountain to stay there, to revel in the power or to bask in the glory. No, I go up the mountain so that I can come down and bring everyone else up, too."

So, during this season of Lent, let us guard against getting spiritual high-altitude sickness as we hop from mountaintop to mountaintop, until we get to the cross on Mount Calvary. Remember that the only reason we go up the mountain is so that we can come back down to change lives, ours and others.’ We go up for perspective, so we can see things as God sees them. Then we come back down better equipped to deal with problems. We go up for power—not ours, but God’s—and come back down not to control others but to encourage them. We don’t go up for the glory; we come down to serve and give God the glory.

I was standing in the check-out line at Trader Joe’s on Friday night. I heard the checker tell the man in front of me that Sunday was her last day. When she got to me, I asked her where she was going. She said that she was quitting so that she could hike the PCT for her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. For those of you who don’t know, the Pacific Crest Trail starts at Campo, California, near the Mexico border, and

runs 2,653 miles to the Canadian border. There is 420,880 feet of elevation change along the way.

The checker told me that she was a recruiter at Stanford and was working a second job to raise the \$30,000 she needed to make the trip. She had taken every class she could, and she was as ready as she'd ever be. Now, I can't tell you exactly what was motivating her, but I am certain that she is in for a journey of self-discovery. For every journey up and out is also a journey down and in. And that is my hope for each of you as you journey through Lent. As you climb up real and metaphorical mountains and then come back down, I want you to discover things about yourself and about God that will rock your world and change your life. For every day from now until Easter is a great day for up. The mountains are calling, and we must go.